

Andrea Hicks

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99 Nightingale Lane

Part 1

Andrea Hicks



Nightingale Lane Publishing

Dedicated to my grandmother,
Caroline Violet Elizabeth Dobbs

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Chapter 1

DECEMBER 1914

Carrie Dobbs shivered as she stepped out of the basement lobby. She inhaled a deep breath then sighed, releasing clouds of vapour into the night air before gently shutting the door behind her. Pulling her woollen shawl firmly around her shoulders she wrapped her arms around herself to keep out the sharp cold. Climbing the five worn stone steps that led up to the pavement, the ones she ascended once a week, she opened the black wrought iron gate which gave a familiar squeal, and stepped up onto the pavement. The gate swung back into position behind her and closed with a comforting click against the railings. She looked down at her feet and marvelled at the grey flagstones, so ordinary in the daylight but now overlaid in an intricate lace of frost and glistening with reflected light from the yellow orbs of the streetlamps edging the path. She walked to the centre of the pavement, the pale grey skirt of her maid's uniform skimming the path, and looked up at the imposing house on the tree-lined street. Heavy curtains were pulled across every window, a warm blush glow from the lamps inside penetrating the lavish ruby-red velvet. She looked away, a wave of loneliness and despair sweeping over her taking her breath away. Lifting her gaze back to the house where she had served as a maid for two years tears pooled in her eyes. She brushed them away with the back of her knitted fingerless glove, then reluctantly turned away from the house and began the two and a half mile walk home.

A swirling mist had settled around the tops of the streetlamps and she pulled the brown chenille tasselled shawl even tighter around her slim shoulders. As she reached the corner of Nightingale Lane, white-hot sparks from the chestnut seller's brazier pierced the darkness. The embers fell from the brazier in a shower and sizzled as they made contact with the frozen flagstones. Carrie smiled, her spirits lifting as the delicious smell of roasted chestnuts floated down the street towards her.

The seller glanced up as she walked towards him, recognition crossing his face. He shovelled a scoop of chestnuts into a brown paper bag and held them out to her. 'Here you are, Carrie. They'll warm you right through.'

She smiled at him and shook her head. 'Not tonight, Joe. They smell so good they're making my mouth water but I can't afford it. The rent man comes tonight and we've got just about enough with this

week's wages from Dad and me.'

He pulled a comical face which made her laugh. 'Have them anyway. My good deed for the day. Oh, go on,' he said, pushing them on to her. 'I might not get the chance to do it again.'

She stared at him. 'Have you been called up?'

He nodded. 'You'll have to get your chestnuts from someone else from now on. This is my last week. I leave on Sunday.'

'Oh, Joe. You must be so scared. And what about your family? Christmas is just around the corner.'

'Not scared exactly. I have to do my bit, don't I, for King and country. Look how many lads have already gone. I can't turn my back on them no matter how much I'll miss the kids.'

She leant forward and kissed his cheek. 'Good luck, Joe. I'll be thinking of you and all the other boys who've had to leave their loved ones. Stay safe. I'll try and pop in to see your Molly and the nippers over Christmas. Just to say hello, and maybe take them a few bits from the 'ouse if I can get them.'

'That would be so good of you, Carrie. My Molly's so worried. She says she don't know how she's going to make ends meet with the bit we'll get. I'll be sending her what I can but Lord knows if it'll be enough. We're living on scraps as it is.'

'I know. Everyone's having to tighten their belts what with the war an' all. I'll do what I can, Joe. I promise.'

He smiled warmly at her. 'I know you will, Carrie. You're a good'un you are.'

She continued her journey, her hands clasped around the bag of hot chestnuts. It gave her comfort, the heat from the chestnuts penetrating her woollen gloves but it didn't lift her heavy heart. She thought about Joe's wife and three children. The youngest was only a few months old and she knew there was a chance he might not see them again. It's so sad, she thought. So very sad.

As she neared her home the scenery gradually changed. The well-maintained lanes with their grand houses and imposing entrances were gradually replaced by grim tenement filled streets patrolled by small gatherings of unkempt children, unfed and uncared for, their noses running with snot and their faces unwashed of the grime of the dirty streets. Their thin cheeks were bright red and nipped with the cold. None of them wore a coat and a few didn't have shoes. Shoes were a luxury most parents could ill-afford. She heard some of the children coughing, the rasping hoop of tuberculosis or bronchitis infected lungs punctuating the screams of laughter as they fought to get their breath in the cold damp air. A few of the girls pushed battered prams made from orange boxes, the latest additions to their parents constantly increasing broods hidden amongst the dirty

blankets. The babies cried for their mothers, wondering when their next meal would be, their tiny bellies craving milk. Their cries were ignored by the other children whose attentions were directed towards having as much fun as possible away from the reprimands of their parents who neither worried nor cared as long as their offspring were out of sight. Women stood on the corners of the streets; some were as “rough as ‘ouses” as Carrie’s mother would often say when she was on a rant, but some were ordinary women who didn’t know where the next meal would come from and had to get money to feed their kids somehow. Their bodies were all they had left to trade with, and Carrie blessed herself as she walked by them, praying she would never be in the same position.

She shook her head, the contrast of the two worlds she occupied not lost on her. She realised that the disparity between the two was a secret given up more readily when night closed in. Nightingale Lane was unashamedly opulent, the brightly lit glass Tilly lamps decorated with crystals shone through sparkling windows and the pristine facades with gleaming black front doors fronting the lavish homes which were occupied by luxuriously dressed residents whose lives were relatively untouched by the war. They never went without a meal; the pantry at number ninety-nine was testament to that. It was always well-stocked with everything anyone could wish for and more besides, things Carrie hadn’t even heard of and definitely didn’t want to eat no matter how hungry she got. She stopped when she got to the corner and watched as a mother dragged her child into a slum, clipping his ear as he went. Here was her street. The gut-wrenching smell of boiled tripe and cabbage mixed with the throat burning odour from the tanning factory where her brothers worked was constantly on the air surrounding the dirty streets infected with neglect. The overwhelming and seemingly ingrained poverty and apathy of its residents lowered her spirits even further.

She thought of her home, picturing the scene in her mind’s eye. Her mother, Florrie would be in the scullery with its unadorned painted brick walls and faded curtain suspended from a piece of fraying string fastened across the doorway into their tiny living room. Then she’d lean over the old range, putting together a meal with whatever she could afford to spare from the scant income Arthur, Carrie’s father brought in from his job unloading the boats anchored at St. Katherine Dock. Her older sister, Elsie would be sewing by candlelight, squinting in the gloom, making clothes for her baby expected in January; her husband, Len already called up to fight in France. Her brothers, Tom and Alfie would likely still be at work in the tanning factory. Too young to join up, she knew if the war went on much more it wouldn’t be long before it was their turn. She hoped

and prayed that the war would be over long before then. After nearly five months of war the government would have them all believe the war would be over by Christmas. The front pages of the newspapers continued to tell their readers that 'Our Boys Will Be Home for Christmas'. They need to get a move on, she thought. Christmas is only three weeks away.

Her thoughts went back to the houses in Nightingale Lane. Some of them were already decorated with Christmas trees shimmering in the windows, and many heralded the arrival of the festive season with ornate wreaths of holly and dried citrus fruits displayed on the front doors.

As she stepped off the pavement an army truck turned into the street, passing her before she got to the other side. In the back, behind a divided tarpaulin sheet that flapped open as the truck rumbled over the cobbles, were five young men. A couple of them looked like they should have been at home with their mothers, not dressed in the now familiar soldier's uniform on their way to the fighting fields of France. Carrie shivered as she glimpsed their pale faces. She knew their brave expressions belied their quivering hearts as they travelled into the unknown.

She continued walking down Hanbury Street until she got to a shabby front door, painted brown as all the doors in the street were. Carrie took a deep breath and pushed against the door which dropped slightly as she opened it, scraping against the floor as she went into the gloomy hallway.

'Is that you?' a voice called out.

'Yes, Mum.'

'Are you late?'

Carrie hung up her coat and briefly closed her eyes, swallowing hard. 'I don't know. Am I?'

Florrie was in the living room, clearing the table of Elsie's fabric and threads.

'Mum,' Elsie cried. 'I'll do it. Look, I've lost me place now.'

'Well, Dad will be home in a minute. He'll want his dinner on the table after the hours he'll have put in. Come on, Elsie, you've been at it all day. I don't know what's taking you so long, my girl. You'll have to be a bit quicker at things than that when that baby comes. It won't wait for anything as and when it suits you, particularly if it's a boy.'

'You only had to say.' Elsie glanced across to Carrie and rolled her eyes. 'What is it, anyway? For dinner I mean.'

'Can you not smell it? Tripe and onions, and suet pudding and golden sugar for afters. And make the most of it. The food shortages aren't getting any better. I don't know what we'll do for Christmas, what with there not being much about. What little there is, is so

expensive. Someone's making money out of us. It's always the working people what suffer the most.' She glanced at Carrie. 'I expect the Sterns are all right. If you could eat there more often it would be a great help, Carrie. It's a good job you're in work, my girl, although only God knows how long that'll carry on for. And when Alfie and Tom go off to war we'll have even less coming in.' Tears at the thought of her sons going to war filled her eyes, and she wiped them away with her pinafore then blew her not inconsiderable nose loudly on the floral fabric.

Carrie held the still warm chestnuts out to her mother. 'We could have these with our suet, Mum.'

Florrie snatched the bag from her. 'Chestnuts? What're you wasting money on bloody chestnuts for, our Carrie? For goodness sake, girl, we don't need chestnuts.'

'I didn't spend anything. Joe gave them to me. He's been called up. I think he just wanted to do something nice.'

Florrie's expression of annoyance fell from her face. 'Oh, well, in that case. That's different, that is.'

Elsie pushed herself off of the chair by the fireside and placed her precious baby garments into a wicker sewing box. 'Dunno what you're worrying about. If there's no food around to be bought it don't matter how much money we've got.'

'We still have to pay the rent. And buy coal,' said Florrie. 'You won't want to bring your little mite home to a cold house, will you? Tut, I dunno. Makes you wonder what the point is of bringing more babies into this world. I hope it's a girl you have, our Elsie. I couldn't bear to think of another of our boys going off to war.'

Elsie turned her head and looked at her mother crossly. 'For goodness sake, Mum. It won't go on that long. They said it'll be all over by Christmas. For God's sake, stop worrying. Len will be home by the time this one comes along, and he'll help us,' she said smiling to herself. 'He's clever is my Len. We won't go short then. He knows how to get money.' She rubbed her bump protectively.

'That's as maybe,' said Florrie. 'And I don't want to know where Len West gets his money from. It's bound to be dodgy, knowing him. He's got his fingers in too many pies, that one. He wants to be careful he don't get 'em burnt. And anyway. Who said? Who said it'll be over by Christmas. It'll be one of the shortest wars in history if it is. I don't trust 'em. They'll say anything to keep our mouths shut.' Florrie glanced at Carrie. 'You're quiet tonight.' She frowned. 'Not coming down with anything, are you? We can't afford to have you off of work, Carrie. We need every ha'penny.'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, I'm just a bit tired. Mrs Stern had us spring cleaning again this week.'

‘Spring cleaning? In the winter? What’s wrong with the woman?’

‘They’ve got guests staying at Christmas. She said she wanted the house to look like a new pin.’

Elsie lifted her chin. ‘Bloody ‘ell, it’s all right for some. I’d feel lucky if I had an old pin. Guests indeed. I suppose Her Ladyship’s got a Christmas tree up already.’

Carrie nodded. ‘And you should see what they’ve got in the pantry. I don’t know where they get it all from. Some of it I’ve never even heard of.’

‘Connections,’ said Florrie, pulling a, “don’t argue with me” face. ‘That’s how they do it. They’re a family with connections. They know all the right people. It’s because Conrad Stern’s something big somewhere, you mark my words. He’s not a man to be argued with. And his wife’s not much better I’ll be bound.’ She glanced at Carrie. ‘Couldn’t you hide some of what’s in their pantry under your coat, Carrie, before you come ‘ome? They wouldn’t miss any of it would they? They probably haven’t got a clue what’s in there. People like that...they never do know what they’ve got. I shouldn’t think they’ve ever looked in the sodding pantry. Probably don’t even know what one is. It won’t mean anything to them but it’d mean everything to us. Maybe we could have a Christmas after all.’

Before Carrie could answer Arthur pushed the front door open, rubbing his hands together. He went across to the fire and stood in front of it, then turned and warmed his backside.

‘Brr, it’s bloody cold out there. What a day we’ve had down at the docks. That Frederick Day from Bucks Row had a pallet fall on his leg. He’ll never work at the docks again, poor sod. Reckon that leg of his is finished. Crushed like eggshell it was. ‘Orrible. Blood everywhere. He’ll probably have to have it off. I’ve never heard anyone scream like that before.’

‘He’s got kids, hasn’t he?’ said Florrie quietly, all of her previous vehemence fading in the knowledge of Arthur’s workmate’s accident.

Arthur nodded. ‘Four and one on the way. God knows what they’ll do. The only compensation I can think of is that he won’t be called up, but they could very well starve. It’s a bad business.’

Florrie beckoned him to the table. ‘Well, you make sure it don’t happen to you, Arthur Dobbs. You need both your legs and your arms, an’ all. Now, you come and have your tea. You look like death warmed up.’

‘Charming! What is it?’

‘Tripe and onions.’

He sat at the table and looked at her aghast. ‘Again?’

Florrie went into the scullery to get the pot of tripe. ‘Oh, now, don’t start complaining, Arthur Dobbs. It’s all I could get and at least

it's hot. Look, I've made some bread to dip in the liquor.'

Arthur sighed. 'I'm not complaining, Florrie. It's not your fault, love. Blame the Bosch, although they're probably eating worse than we are.'

'Serves 'em right,' said Florrie. 'It's what they get for being difficult.'

Arthur threw back his head and laughed, and Carrie and Elsie giggled. 'Difficult?' he cried. 'Bloody 'ell, Florrie. I think they're being a bit more than difficult, sweet'eat. You say some funny things, you really do. Better 'ope it don't get really bad. Don't know what you'd say then. Difficult indeed.' Elsie and Carrie joined him at the table, and Florrie put steaming plates in front of them. Elsie tucked into hers with relish, and Florrie was pleased with herself that she'd managed to feed her family on very little.

Carrie looked down at her plate. The folds of grey, rubbery tripe began to nauseate her and she pushed her plate away.

'I'm sorry, Mum. I'm not hungry.'

Arthur glanced across at her, frowning. 'You been eating at the Stern's again? You get decent food there, don't you? I'm glad at least one member of this family is doing all right.'

'I had something before I came home. You can share this between Tom and Alfie. They're always starving no matter how much you give them. They can have my share of bread too.'

Arthur patted her hand. 'You're a good girl. Always thinking about other people.'

Carrie smiled. 'I might take a bowl of hot water upstairs and have a wash before the boys come in. Is that all right, Mum?'

'Course it is, love. You go on up. You're looking a bit peaky tonight. That Stern woman works you and those other girls far too hard. An early night will do you good. What time you startin' tomorrow?'

'Er, usual time.'

Carrie took the knitted cloth that hung inside the inglenook and wrapped it around the handle of the huge kettle hanging in the fireplace which was black from age and use. She carried it into the scullery and poured boiling water into a chipped enamel bowl, then filled the kettle again and returned it to the hanger. Holding the edge of the bowl in both hands she negotiated the narrow wooden stairs, careful not to spill any of the boiling hot liquid. Upstairs there were two rooms, one for her and Elsie, the other for Florrie and Arthur. The boys slept downstairs, one on the sofa made up into a bed, the other on a mattress they kept under the stairs which they took in turns to use, the mattress being the more comfortable of the two. Carrie went into the small, sparsely furnished room and put the bowl down on a

wooden dresser, then opened the one drawer allocated to her and retrieved a flannel, a small bar of lavender scented soap and a hairbrush.

She undressed in the freezing cold room where ice had gathered on the inside of the window and began to wash, enjoying the warmth of the hot water that steamed up the foxed mirror sitting on the old-fashioned chest of drawers, and breathed in the calming scent of lavender. When she was finished she pulled a clean flannelette nightgown over her head and wrapped a pink knitted shawl around her shoulders. Then she got into the bed she shared with Elsie and pulled the covers up to her chin. The embroidered cotton pillowcase was cool against her cheek and she closed her eyes and sighed. When she was downstairs with the others she could forget the thing that had played on her mind for weeks, but every time she tried to sleep it came hurtling back to her. Even when she was asleep she would dream of it. She opened her eyes and stared at the wall, following the large split in the chipped plaster that went from the ceiling to the floor, thinking there was nothing like it at the Stern house where everything was perfect and beautiful. She couldn't imagine Mrs. Stern ever deigning to enter a room like the bedroom Carrie shared with Elsie, let alone their house in Hanbury Street which might as well be a million miles away from Nightingale Lane. Probably doesn't even realise places like this exist, she thought.

There was a soft rap on the bedroom door and she sat up.

'Who is it?'

'It's Tom.'

She relaxed back against the pillows. 'Come in then.'

A tall, fair-haired lad entered the room and Carrie gestured for him to shut the door. He closed it quietly and sat on the end of the bed. He stared at her as if waiting for her to say something, but she just looked down and played with the tassels on her shawl.

He tutted. 'Well?'

She glanced up at him, her eyes dark. 'Well, what?'

He stared at her and his jaw hardened. 'Come on, Carrie. Has anything happened?' She shook her head and he bit his lip. 'What're you going to do?'

'I don't know. I don't want to think about it.'

'But Carrie...'

She held her hand up to stop him. 'I know, Tom. I know.'

'Maybe you're ill.'

'It's making me feel bloody ill, I can tell you, worrying about it all the time. I wish I could forget about it. I wish it would just go away, but it doesn't matter what I'm doing it's still there. Anyway, you shouldn't be worrying about me. You should be thinking about

yourself. You're nearly sixteen. You might be called up soon and you'll forget all about me, I can assure you. You'll have far more important things to think about.' They both went quiet.

'Is it a baby?' he whispered.

She nodded, the corners of her mouth turned down. 'I think so.'

'How far is it?'

'Three months.'

His mouth dropped open. 'You'll have to tell Mum and Dad, Carrie. And you'll have to tell him.'

'They'll find out soon enough. And I'm hoping he'll stand by me. It takes two, doesn't it, to make a baby. I didn't do it on me own.'

He blushed to his roots, and looked away, embarrassed. 'Well, when you put it like that.'

'I do put it like that. We made this baby between us and we're both equally responsible for it.'

'D'you think he'll see it like that? Why are you so sure about him? And what about his family. They're not like us, are they? They wouldn't understand how we live. They're different. They've got money and...and things. They live in a great big house. They're even a different religion.'

'And what religion are we exactly?'

'C of E, aren't we? We used to go to the church near Hanbury Street when we were kids. Mum used to take us.'

'And when was the last time you went there and listened to the sermon, and prayed, and sang hymns out of a hymn book?'

He shook his head. 'Can't remember.'

'Exactly. So what difference is it going to make?'

'It might make a difference to them.' She shrugged and looked away and he wondered if she'd fly at him when he said what he was going to say. 'I want you to tell Mum and Dad...before you tell him.'

She glanced back at him. 'I'm not telling them yet, and it's got nothing to do with you,' she said, pointing her finger at him. 'It's none of your business. Don't make me wish I hadn't told you.'

He got up and stood by the door. 'If you don't tell them, I will. I'll tell them you've got a bun in the oven. You need them, Carrie. You need your family, and you need Mum and Dad. He's not family. You work for his parents and he should have known better. I know I'm only fifteen, but even I know that. He's used you.'

'Tom! Please don't. I'll tell them when I'm ready.'

'No, Carrie. Tell them now, or I will.'



Chapter 2

The flames in the grate suddenly flared, and a hissing sound came from the blocks of wood Arthur had thrown on the fire, scavenged from a derelict building site near the docks. Carrie swallowed hard and glanced at Tom. He didn't move. They stood in front of their parents like two naughty schoolchildren waiting to be punished for some minor misdemeanour or other. Florrie and Arthur stared at Carrie in disbelief then Florrie's eyes narrowed.

'So, you're telling us you're in the family way?'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes.'

'And Johan Stern is the father.'

'Yes.'

'And you're three months gone.'

Carrie took a deep breath. 'Yes,' she answered, her voice almost a whisper. Arthur looked at Florrie and shook his head. He got up from his fireside chair and took the kettle into the scullery where he put two cups and saucers on the dresser. He spooned two small scoops of tealeaves into a teapot and poured boiling water onto them, replacing the chipped lid. He stared vacantly at the teapot as if waiting for it to provide a solution to all the ills that seemed to befall his family. After a minute he lifted the lid and stirred the infusion, replacing the lid again. He poured the tea into the cups and stirred two generous spoons of condensed milk from a tin into each.

Carrie leant back slightly and peered through the curtain dividing the sitting room from the scullery. She watched her father's methodical making of the tea, observed him moving about the compact scullery as though automated. Her heart clenched with sorrow. I've let him down, she thought. I've really let him down.

Arthur came through the curtain holding the cups and saucers and passed one to Florrie before sitting next to the fire.

'Drink that, Florrie. I think you need it. I know I do.'

Florrie sipped the hot tea, then looked up at Carrie. 'So, what are you going to do?'

Carrie stared at her. Was this all her mother had to say? 'I don't...I don't know. I hadn't got that far.' Her eyes went to her father who said nothing. 'I s'pose I'll have to find somewhere to live, won't I, until Johan and I decide what to do.'

'That's quite a name, isn't it?' said Arthur at last. 'Johan.' His eyes met hers for the first time. 'Does he know?'

She clutched her hands behind her back and looked down at her

feet. 'No.'

Arthur sighed. 'Y'know Carrie, I thought you of all people had more sense. You're seventeen and unmarried. And now you've got a bun in the oven. Do you think he'll want to marry you, a scullery maid who works for his parents? You're the lowest of the low as far as he's concerned. He's used you, Carrie, and you've brought that trouble 'ome.'

'Johan loves me.'

'Does he?' Arthur laid his cup and saucer in the hearth and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. 'And what about his parents. Do they love you? Do you honestly think they'll allow him to marry someone like you? They're Jewish, Carrie. They mix with people like them. They'll want him to marry one of his own kind.'

'But I'm carrying his child.'

'Says you,' said Florrie.

Carrie bristled at her mother's inference. 'What d'you mean by that?'

'It's your word against theirs. That child you're carrying could be anyone's...some little snot-nose wharf-rat working on the docks.' Arthur looked at her and frowned. 'Sorry, Arthur. You know I didn't mean it like that but you know full well what I'm saying.' Florrie's voice got louder. 'Wake up, Carrie, for goodness sake. You can't tell him you're pregnant. If you do you'll bring shame down on this family. You'll lose your job for definite because they'll have you out on your ear and that'll be that. No job, no money, and a heap of shame brought down on all of us, including Elsie and your brothers. We might be the people who do the jobs no one else wants to do, and we might not have a penny to bless ourselves with, but what we have got is our dignity, and you're not taking that away from us let me tell you that, my girl.'

'I have to tell him,' cried Carrie. 'He has a right to know he's to become a father.'

'He won't want to know, yer stupid girl. If you want to stay under our roof for the foreseeable you'll do as we say. You will not tell him. You will not. I will not have this family's good name dragged through the mud because you didn't have the good sense to keep yourself clean. I mean it, Carrie. Don't come up against me on this. I know what I'm talking about.'

Carrie looked up at Tom, hoping for support, but his head was bent and he'd closed his eyes. She nudged his arm to get his attention, then frowned at him wondering why he didn't speak up in her defence. He shook his head and looked sad, but said nothing.

'I won't be able to stay at Nightingale Lane forever, will I?' she said to her parents. 'I'll start to show and then the game will be up. Surely

if Johan knows about the baby we can make a home. Him and me. And the baby. And we can get married and...the family...you won't lose any dignity because no one will be any the wiser.'

Florrie left her chair and took her cup and saucer into the scullery. Carrie heard her drop them into the water in the washing-up bowl, then open the scullery door and go out to the yard where the outhouse was. Her eyes went to Arthur. She knew he'd always had a soft spot for her. She hoped he would see it from her point of view, but he simply lit his pipe, leaned forward in the chair and stared morosely into the fire.

Carrie knew she'd lost. She hadn't known what to expect from her family when she told them; she knew they wouldn't be as happy for her as they'd been for Elsie, Elsie was married, but she thought they'd take her under their wing, find a solution and support her plan to be with Johan. She stood quietly next to Tom as the fire continued to flicker orange light into the room like Morse code. The silence was unbearable and she felt the nausea that had woken her in the early hours for the past few weeks swirling around in her stomach and threatening to put in an appearance. She hesitated, then walked towards the stairs leading off the sitting room. She put a foot on the bottom step, and before going upstairs turned and looked back at Tom. He was rooted to the spot, his head down, his hands pushed deep into his pockets.

'Tom.' He looked up at her and she was shocked to see that his eyes were full of tears. She smiled at him and put her head to one side. 'Come and talk to me.'

He nodded and followed her up the stairs. 'I'm sorry, Carrie,' he whispered. 'I didn't know it would be like that. I thought they'd help you, y'know, tell you what to do.'

'They did tell me what to do.'

They went into the bedroom and Carrie scrambled under the covers, shivering with the cold. Tom sat on the bed and wrapped the eiderdown around his shoulders, pulling his knees up to his chest. 'What will you do? Will you tell Johan?'

'I don't think I have a choice, do I, Tom. You heard what they said. If I tell him I'm out of here. Where the hell would I go?'

'D'you love him?'

She nodded, and then a thought occurred to her. 'You haven't told Alfie, have you? Tell me you haven't told him.'

He shook his head, then looked pointedly at her stomach. 'But he'll notice, won't he, when you start to get bigger? He might be young but he's not stupid. Everyone will notice eventually.'

She nodded and stared off into the distance. 'Yeah. Everyone will notice eventually.'



Chapter 3

Carrie rose from her kneeling position in front of the grate and rubbed her hand across her forehead leaving a smear of gritty black charcoal on her skin. It was the fifth grate she had cleared, prepared, and lit that morning. She looked at the gilt clock on the mantelpiece. It was not yet six and still dark outside. She put both hands on the small of her back and stretched. At five months pregnant her body had begun to change and she wondered how long she would be able to disguise her swelling stomach. At home she could relax about her developing body; the whole family knew about her pregnancy and who the father was. All had been sworn to secrecy.

Every female member of staff at Nightingale Lane was expected to wear a plain grey long-sleeved dress, a white apron, white sleeve protectors; black for messy jobs, and a white bonnet that must cover the hair completely, the uniform that marked them out from their employers. The grey dress was changed every three days, the white cotton pinafore, bonnet and protectors, every day. The apron covered a multitude of sins, successfully concealing the roundness of her belly. Florrie had let out the seams of her grey dress until there was no more fabric left.

Being a maid for the Sterns meant Carrie must sleep-in at Nightingale Lane six days out of seven. The sixth day she could go home in the evening. The following day was her day off but she had to back at Nightingale Lane in time to help with the hot, milky toddies the family had before they went to bed. She rose at five every morning, poured water from a jug into a bowl in the bedroom, dressed hastily in the icy room, and went downstairs to the huge kitchen. There, she would light the hob on the cooking range ready for Mrs. Coyle the cook so she could begin the breakfast preparations at six, and prepare breakfast trays for Mrs Stern and her eldest daughter, Olivia, who ate their first meal of the day in their bedrooms.

In the drawing room, sitting room, and study she would draw the curtains and check the rooms were in good order; in the dining room she would set the table for Mr Stern, Johan, and the two younger girls, Liliana and Rachel. After all this was completed, she would clean the grates and build and light the fires in each room, the job she hated most of all.

The four overnight maids shared two rooms in the upper floor of the house. The rooms were plain with dark green utility iron beds covered in a white sheet, grey blanket and pale green eiderdown. The

girls shared a dresser and a washstand, jug and bowl. There was also a tiny table between the beds to give them a semblance of separation, a kind of boundary between them indicating their own small, allocated space. The maid's shifts were on rotation, but every other week Carrie would share her room with her best friend, Pearl. This was the shift she loved the most because it meant she could spend time with her closest friend. Their shifts usually finished at about eleven-thirty by which time all the Sterns had retired, then Carrie and Pearl would run up four flights of back stairs to the top of the house where they would swiftly undress, giggling and shivering with the cold, and jump into bed. When they had snuffed out the candle on the dresser, the only source of light for their room, they would snuggle under the covers and talk into the early hours, whispering their innermost secrets to each other, telling each other of their dreams and aspirations.

'I'll probably marry William,' Pearl said one night. 'And have loads of babies.'

'Is it what you want, Pearl?' Carrie had asked her.

Pearl nodded. 'Why would I want anything else? He's already asked me. We're sort of engaged.'

Carrie had grinned at her through the darkness, and they'd each reached out into the cold and held hands across the divide between the beds. 'I'm so happy for you, Pearl. Will you have a party?'

Pearl laughed. 'No...no party, but I don't care. Me mum and dad can't afford anything like that, but as long as William and I are together, it's all that counts.'

Carrie wanted to ask her a question but didn't want to spoil her happiness. She looked at her friend and wondered if she envied her. She and Johan were so close, yet they couldn't announce their relationship like Pearl and William. Johan had said it wasn't the right time; that they should wait until he could speak to his parents about her. Well she had waited and they didn't seem to be any nearer to the "right time". Perhaps Johan will ask me to get engaged, she thought. We could have a double wedding with Pearl and William.

'I know what you're thinking, Carrie' said Pearl. 'William's been called up to fight, but if the war ends when they say it will we'll get married when he comes home. We've got it all planned. We'll marry at St. Mary's Church in Whitechapel. We're having pink roses and cream peonies because they're my favourite. I want an ivory dress made of silk, and a veil with a rose headdress.'

She lowered her eyes, then looked back at Carrie. 'Will you be my bridesmaid, Carrie? I would love it if you would say yes.'

Carrie squeezed her hand. 'Oh, Pearl, of course I'll be your bridesmaid. You're my best friend. I'd be honoured.'



THAT NIGHT, WHEN CARRIE and Pearl went up to their attic room, Carrie didn't take the stairs two at a time as she usually did, but ascended the stairs gradually, her breath coming in short bursts. Pearl glanced back at her and frowned.

'You okay, Carrie? You're not ill, are you?'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, I'm alright. I just feel tired. It's been really busy in the house today. Mrs Coyle's been on my back all day. Don't know what's wrong with her. Reckon she's going through the change.'

Pearl shrugged. 'Christ, I reckon she went through that years ago. She must be sixty if she's a day. And if she ain't she bloody-well looks it.'

Once inside the room Carrie sat on the bed and wondered how she would find the strength to get up again at five the next morning. She'd started to struggle with the early mornings. Pearl placed the candle on the dresser and got undressed.

'Jesus Save Us, it's like an igloo in here. I'll be glad when the better weather comes,' she gasped. 'I've never known it so cold. I wish the Sterns would put one of those little paraffin heaters up here. They can't know how cold it is.'

Carrie laughed. 'You say that every week. They don't know how cold it is up here, how could they? They've never set foot in this room, and they don't care neither. They're all nice and warm down there because we make sure they are. As snug as bugs in a rug. Not like us, shaking like jellies.' She waited for Pearl to get into bed then blew out the candle before taking off her dress. She wanted to tell Pearl about the baby but hadn't yet found the courage and she wondered what Florrie would say if she found out. Getting undressed for bed after her shift had become a nightmare.

Pearl had noticed Carrie had changed her routine and she leaned up on her elbow. 'Why do you do that?'

Carrie frowned at her in the darkness pretending not to know what she meant. Her breath caught in her throat. 'Do what?'

'Blow the candle out before you get undressed. You never used to.'

Carrie frowned. 'Didn't I?'

Pearl sat up in bed. 'You know you didn't. What's going on, Carrie. You've been different the last couple of weeks...y'know, a bit distant. Is it because I said William and me was getting married? I'll always be your friend y'know. We'll always be best friends, won't we?'

Tears welled in Carrie's eyes. She wanted nothing more than to tell Pearl how worried and upset she was, and how the thought of giving

birth frightened the life out of her. Her family had forbidden her to speak about it to anyone else but she was fit to bursting with it and she needed someone to confide in other than Tom. Pearl was her closest friend. Telling her would be alright, Carrie knew she could trust her. She relit the candle, placing it on the little table separating their beds and sat down, warming her hands between her knees. 'I'm pregnant, Pearl,' she whispered.

Pearl's mouth dropped open. She stared at Carrie in shock. 'Pregnant? Wha...what do you mean? How did that happen?' Carrie looked at her and raised her eyebrows. 'Well, alright I know how. But Carrie you don't even have a boyfriend. You spend all your own time at home with your mum and dad.'

Pearl got out of bed ignoring the cold and sat next to Carrie. She put an arm around her shoulders.

'Let me see.'

'No, Pearl. I'm embarrassed.'

'But are you sure, Carrie. Maybe you've made a mistake. You're so young, you could have got it wrong, you know. Let me see.'

'I'm only a year younger than you. I'm not an idiot.'

'No, course you're not. I wasn't saying that.' Pearl lifted Carrie's dress to her waist, then gently lowered it again. 'How far are you?'

'About five months gone.'

Pearl went quiet. 'You poor little girl. Who was it? Did he force himself on you? It happens you know, in these big houses. Who is it, Carrie? Who's the father?'

'Johan.'

Pearl's hands flew to her mouth to stop her from crying out. After a few moments she lowered them to her lap. 'Johan,' she whispered. 'You mean Johan Stern.' Carrie nodded. 'But when? When could it have happened?'

'It wasn't just once. We're having a relationship, Pearl. We love each other. We didn't mean this to happen, it just did.'

'Does he know?'

'No. My mum and dad do, though. They said I'm not to say anything to Johan, but I want to tell him, Pearl. I think he should know he's got a baby coming.'

Pearl got up and sat over on her own bed opposite Carrie. She leant forward and reached for Carrie's cold hands, squeezing them tightly in her own.

'Carrie, listen to me. You mustn't tell him. Never. Your name will be mud and you'll never get your reputation back again. They'll deny the baby is Johan's. They'll say that a girl like you would go with anyone, and everyone in Whitechapel will know what you've done. Listen to your mum and dad. You'll have to leave here soon anyway

because it won't be long before everyone will know. You're as skinny as a hairpin so you've got a bit of time. That's the one good thing about never having enough to eat. We never put on any weight do we?"

"Surely he should know. We said we were going to be together...make a life. We agreed, Pearl."

Pearl closed her eyes and when she opened them again, Carrie's deeply troubled ones were staring at her. She obviously hadn't heard the news. Pearl took a deep breath wishing she didn't have to be the bearer of bad news.

"Johan Stern is getting married, Carrie, but not to you, sweetheart. His parents have arranged a marriage for him with a Jewish girl who has just arrived in England from America with her parents for the wedding. Did he not tell you?"

Carrie shook her head miserably. Tears ran down her cheeks, all her hopes and dreams evaporating into thin air.

"I do love him, Pearl. Really, I do."

Pearl nodded, her mouth a straight line. "Yeah, well I could knock his bloody block off right now. Stupid idiot. He's used you, Carrie. I'm so sorry. I know you think he loves you and I wish there could be a happy ending for you, but I don't think it's going to happen. Where will you and the baby go? Will you live at your mum and dad's? Maybe, in time, you'll be able to pass the baby off as Elsie's."

"She's already pregnant."

"I know, but people have short memories. You could go away somewhere for a little while, p'raps to some relatives. You could get another job after the baby's born, but not here, Carrie. You need to get away from this family." Carrie nodded and Pearl squeezed her hand again. "It'll be alright," she said. "I'll do your heavy jobs until you leave. You've got to take care of yourself now, do you understand?"

Carrie nodded again, silent, unable to put words to the way she was feeling. Then a thought occurred to her. "When? When is Johan getting married?"

"Next week, at the synagogue in Sandys Row."

Carrie breathed a sigh of relief. "So I won't have to serve. I'll be off shift, thank goodness. I won't have to see them."

"No, you won't have to see him. Thank goodness."



Chapter 4

The week went by too quickly for Carrie and the day of Johan's wedding seemed to speed towards her. Over the previous few days there had been much coming and going in the house; tailors, seamstresses, florists, and hairdressers, all dancing attendance on Mrs Stern and her three daughters.

'Anyone would think it was them getting married,' Pearl whispered to Carrie, grinning, as they cleaned the house from top to bottom yet again. Pearl rubbed the windows vigorously, taking out her frustration on the already gleaming glass. 'Honestly, how bloody clean does she want the place to be? We did all this a couple of weeks ago.' Carrie was polishing the best silver and was well aware that if Mrs Stern couldn't see her reflection in the cutlery when she inspected it she would come down on her like a ton of bricks. She didn't answer Pearl. She had a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach and she knew it was nothing to do with her pregnancy. The thought that Johan would be married to another girl without even knowing he was father to Carrie's child filled her with sorrow. She tried to concentrate on the chores Mrs Coyle had given her, but all she could see in her mind's eye was Johan. Pearl glanced at Carrie and looked worried. 'You will be alright, won't you, Carrie? This is like pushing your nose in it. Try to be strong, sweetheart.'

Carrie took a deep breath as she buffed the silver with a cloth. Rubbing away my unhappiness, she thought. If only I could. 'I'm alright. At least I won't be here on the day they get married. It's worked out quite well, taking everything into consideration. At least I won't have to see him. I don't think I could manage that. It would be so hard watching him say all the lovely things to her that he said to me. And even if I had been due in to work I'd have had to come in. I can't take time off, can I? I need the money and I'm going to need it even more soon.'

'We've to black the range this afternoon,' said Pearl. 'I can't imagine why. We only did it recently. I don't think any of the guests will be inspecting the bloody range. They've probably never even seen one. I shouldn't think they could care less as long as their dinner arrives on time.' She smiled gently at Carrie. 'Don't worry, Carrie. You can do the top bits, I'll do underneath.'

'Mrs Coyle won't like that,' said Carrie. 'It's my job to do the rough stuff. I'm the youngest maid apart from the tweeny, aren't I? It's the rules.'

‘Yeah, well, we’re going to break the sodding rules. I won’t tell her if you won’t.’

Carrie looked at her friend, her eyes soft. ‘I love you, Pearl. You’re the best friend anyone could ever have. I’m so glad I’ve got you to confide in. I don’t know how I’d have managed without you.’

Pearl’s face broke into a smile. ‘Get away with you, yer silly mare,’ she said, her face flushing, but a smile danced around her lips and she looked pleased.



IN THE KITCHEN MRS Coyle was loudly instructing the tweeny to wash the pots from lunch. The little girl pulled a face behind Mrs Coyle’s back but got on with it anyway. The last thing she wanted was to have the cook’s wrath come down on her. The last time she’d fallen foul of her it had lasted for days. The big woman was huffing and puffing and complaining about the amount of work she was expected to do with such a small staff. Her face was bright red and her wispy hair kept escaping from under her bonnet. She pushed it back under the headband, but the same grey strands kept falling in front of her eyes.

‘It’s no good, Carrie. You’ll have to come in on your day off this week. I’m sorry girl, but them upstairs have just increased the number of guests they’ve invited to the wedding and we’ll need more staff. Honestly, I don’t know where it’s going to end. It’s bloody ridiculous.’ Carrie froze, staring first at Mrs Coyle, then at Pearl.

‘Carrie doesn’t need to come in on her day off, Mrs Coyle,’ said Pearl. ‘We can manage alright. We’ve got the other girls, and the tweeny can come in, can’t you,’ she said to the girl. ‘You won’t want to miss all the excitement of a posh wedding, will you?’ She looked hard at the girl, daring her to disagree. The girl shook her head. ‘There you go. We’re fine.’

‘No, we are not fine,’ said Mrs Coyle, her hands on her ample hips. ‘We won’t be fine because them upstairs have invited twenty more guests. Everyone will have to come in. I don’t know where they’re getting ‘em from, I really don’t. And don’t forget, their rules for what they like to eat and what they can’t eat need to be observed and respected. We need all hands on-board and that means Carrie as well.’ She turned to Carrie. ‘I don’t know what the fuss is about. You’ll get a day off in lieu, Carrie. And at the end, if there’s food left over from the evening buffet you can take some home for your mum. I should think she’d like that. You young girls should think yourself lucky. It weren’t like this in my day. Now, we really had to work for our living, and we didn’t get no free food to take ‘ome at the end of the day, neither. You

young girls don't know when you're well off. There are great benefits to working in a house like this. Mr and Mrs Stern are very generous and you should be grateful, you really should.'



THEY RUBBED BLACKING all over the range in silence. Carrie did the huge hob and hot plate while Pearl did the ovens. They both had a tin of polish in one hand, an old cloth in the other. They'd scoop fingers of polish onto the cloth then rub it onto the metal. When they'd finished, the range was matt with the black polish. Now they had to wait until it dried then polish it all off, which took an age.

'Shall we have a cup of tea?' said Pearl. 'I'm worn out after that.'

'Alright,' said Carrie. 'I could do with a cuppa.'

'That's right,' said Pearl, pulling off her sleeve protectors. 'Take the weight off your feet. You look done in, Carrie, you really do. You should be putting your feet up a bit in the afternoons.'

'What am I going to do, Pearl? It looks like I'll be here to see Johan get married after all. I don't know how I'll cope. I won't know where to look.'

Pearl poured hot water into the teapot and slammed the kettle back on the hob. 'I wouldn't give him the time of day if I were you. Has he sought you out? Has he tried to talk to you over the past few months? Has he hell. He couldn't care less. That's men with money for you. And you're probably not the first. You definitely won't be the last, that's for sure. I'd stake my wages on it. And that girl he's marrying better get used to it. She won't be the only one. I've no doubt he'll have plenty of other girls hidden away somewhere. Men like that always do.' Carrie hated it when Pearl talked about Johan like this. She was sure he did care, and that if he'd known she was expecting his child would refuse to marry the other girl. 'We're below stairs, Carrie. We're the ones who do all the fetching and carrying. We're here to make the lives of those who live above stairs, comfortable. It's what they pay us for. And believe me, if they find out about you and Johan and they kick you out there'll be a queue of girls waiting at the door to jump into your shoes and your job. Everything is scarce right now, and Mrs. Coyle is right, although I wish she wouldn't keep going on about it. We are lucky to work here.' Carrie nodded, then opened her mouth to defend Johan but Pearl jumped in. 'And don't go thinking he gives a damn, Carrie Dobbs. He doesn't, you mark my words. All he thinks about is himself. If he did care about you his bags would be packed and standing in the hall and so would yours, and you'd be running off into the sunset together, instead of him primping himself up for his posh wedding day and you on your

hands and knees rubbing stinking black gloop over a rusty old cooking range.'



CARRIE WENT INTO THE dining room where a huge dining table large enough to seat forty people was laden with food. A few months before, this sight would have made Carrie's mouth water. Instead, it just made her feel sick.

'We'll eat well over the next few nights,' whispered Pearl as they passed each other carrying trays of canapes. 'That's the good thing about posh people. They think it's rude to eat loads...unlike us. Look at 'em, picking at their food like sparrows. Can't see the point of Mrs Coyle cooking all hours for this ungrateful lot.' Pearl grinned at Carrie, who managed a watery smile. Pearl looked at her sadly. 'It's nearly over, Carrie,' she said quietly. 'They'll all be gone soon, and you can forget all about them. And him.'

Carrie nodded. As she wove her way between the Stern's guests offering tasty bites here, filling a champagne glass there, her eyes were trained on Johan. He looked so handsome in his grey wedding suit, a cream silk cravat tied elegantly at his neck and fastened with a ruby pin. Her heart lurched with need of him. I just want to talk to him, she thought. Just to hear him say my name. She glanced across at his new wife, Lisabet. Carrie swallowed the lump in her throat that threatened to choke her. Johan's new wife was beautiful, with expertly coiled conker-brown hair, creamy skin, and full lips. Her eyes sparkled with happiness as she enjoyed the attention of everyone in the room. All eyes were on her and Carrie knew Lisabet was well aware of it. Her laughter was like a tinkling bell, her posture elegant, almost regal, and Carrie could see she relished being the centre of attention.

Carrie's eyes went to Johan again as he watched Lisabet with pride, a smile of quiet entitlement playing on his lips. Carrie tried to catch his eye but he turned away to speak to a guest. I'm carrying your child, she thought, and you won't even look at me.

'Carrie.' Pearl called to her from the other side of the room. Carrie took a step back then turned and walked towards her. 'What are you doing?' Pearl asked her. 'For God's sake, Carrie, you'll give the game away.'

'I was just looking.'

Pearl sighed and put a comforting hand on her arm. 'I know, but you're playing with fire. Mrs Coyle said she'd noticed you'd put on weight and she can't understand how you've done it, what with rations an' all. If she puts two and two together you'll be out on your

ear. Plus, there'll be questions about the father.' She dragged Carrie out of the dining room and into the vestibule. 'You have to wise up about this,' she whispered. 'I know this is hard for you but you've got to get your head together and think about you and the baby. Never mind 'im.' She glanced into the dining room where Johan and Lisabet stood closely together, laughing and smiling with the guests, and seemingly in love. 'He's married now, lost to you forever. Forget about him and move on, Carrie. He has a new wife and a new life. And you have a little 'un on the way. Move on.'

The sun had not yet broken through the early morning mist, but when Carrie looked up she could just see it as it lightly touched the slow-moving cloud with silver. Every cloud has a silver lining, she thought. She dawdled home, not relishing the thought of returning there, yet accepted there was nowhere else for her to go. Since her family had known about her pregnancy there had been a terrible atmosphere in the house. She felt awkward around her parents, and their indifference towards her, she knew, was brought about by their unease and disappointment at her condition. Her pregnancy was an admission of what had happened between her and Johan, and she felt embarrassed in their company.

Elsie had barely spoken to her since the night Carrie had told her parents about the baby. Pearl suggested it was probably because Carrie had stolen her thunder. Elsie was the eldest daughter and had been receiving all the care and attention from her parents since she'd been married, and when she got pregnant there was great excitement. Carrie knew Elsie liked to be at the centre of everything. 'Maybe she thinks you've ruined it for her,' Pearl said. 'She's probably jealous.' Carrie wasn't sure. Florrie and Arthur had shown only their dismay at the condition she was in and she'd certainly received no special treatment. Since the day she had told them they'd barely mentioned it, and Florrie had been particularly dismissive. Elsie had nothing to be jealous of. She was the one with the husband and comfy lifestyle, at least more comfortable than hers. Carrie had hoped their pregnancies might bring them closer, although she and Elsie had never been close. At nineteen Elsie was two years older than Carrie, but it might as well have been twenty-two they had so little in common. Even though they now shared a life-changing experience Elsie still had no time for her.

Florrie and Arthur always looked worried no matter what was going on. In the past it was because of the scant money they had to live on and it had never been easy. When there's little money and the rent's due it keeps you awake at night. And Arthur wasn't getting any younger. He had a terrible cough, and Carrie often heard him wheezing and spluttering in the small hours where he couldn't get his breath. He was getting on, his forties had brought with them some bad

health; aches and pains, coughs and colds that lasted longer than they should. Doctors were out of the question. They couldn't afford the medicines so there was no point in consulting a physician. She worried about him most of all, but she knew why their worries were worse than usual, and she understood. The war had brought food shortages into the homes of families all over the country, and theirs was no different. Soon she would have to leave her position at Nightingale Lane, there was no way out of it, which meant a significant wage less and another mouth to feed. The bag of food Mrs Coyle had given her before she'd left Nightingale Lane; a peace offering from her for her parents held so tightly in her hand her fingernails cut into her palm, gave her confidence. She was sure her family would be pleased when they saw what she'd brought home. Everything made such a difference to them, no matter how small or insignificant it would have been to the Sterns.

She pushed the front door open and stepped into the hall. As she went into the living room she could hear voices coming from the scullery. She frowned and glanced at Elsie who sat in her usual place in front of the fire. She looked up from her knitting, and without a smile or saying a word in greeting raised her eyebrows at Carrie and then inhaled a breath she released as slowly as she could. Carrie could hear her mother and father's voice but there was another, a male voice she didn't recognise. The thick curtain between the scullery and the living room had been drawn across, so the voices sounded muffled and she couldn't quite make out what they were saying. She walked towards the scullery and pulled the curtain aside.

'Carrie!' Florrie jumped and her reaction at seeing Carrie standing in the scullery entrance made Carrie wary. 'I didn't think you'd be home today. You said you'd have to stay at Nightingale Lane tonight. Why aren't you at work?'

'Mrs Coyle said I wasn't needed. The guests have all gone home and the Sterns are resting after the wedding. I think they're glad to see the back of everyone to be honest. Even Mrs Stern was happy to see us go and she hates it if we don't work out our time to the last minute.' Her eyes went to the man standing behind her parents. He was tall with a slim build. His fine fair hair was parted in the middle and so thin his scalp showed through the greasy strands. His pencil-thin moustache was wispy and fair and wouldn't have been noticeable if it hadn't been for the streak of nicotine at the edges staining it orangey-brown. Smartly dressed in a grey suit and a white shirt with a highly starched collar, he observed Carrie with a scorn that shook her.

'This is Mr Bateman,' said Florrie.' Carrie stood still and said nothing and Florrie looked uncomfortable, an uneasy smile on her lips that didn't reach her eyes.

Arthur spoke up, his voice trembling. He could barely meet Carrie's gaze. 'Mr Bateman, that is, Sergeant-Major Bateman is with the Royal Horse Artillery, y'know in the army. He's been chosen to be posted to India. He's leaving in a few weeks.'

Carrie stared at her father. 'That's nice for him I'm sure, but what's that got to do with us?'

Arthur was about to say something but Florrie interrupted him. 'Mr Bateman has a proposition for us...for you.'

Carrie's heart began to beat wildly. She took a deep breath that wobbled in her chest, then breathed it out, a wave of dread prickling her skin. She knew how her parents felt about her baby. She also knew that if the father had been someone from their own kind, from a family who lived in the blackened streets they all knew like the backs of their hands they would have accepted her predicament far more readily. They would have pulled together like families do in times of hardship or crisis and forcefully encouraged her to marry the father of her baby. He would have been named and shamed and marched down the aisle with Carrie, and her shame as a pregnant girl without a husband would have been brief and forgotten by the next day. As it was she had fallen in love with a man who lived a life utterly different from her own, who lived in luxury they could only dream of and whose prominent position in his social class was certain. Florrie and Arthur had not mentioned Johan Stern's name from the day she had told them about the baby. It was as though he didn't exist.

'What on earth could Mr. Bateman want with me?'

'I know Mrs Bateman, Mr Bateman's mother. She's a fine lady,' said Florrie, turning to him. Sergeant-Major Bateman bowed his head with a small smile to Florrie in thanks for her compliment.

'But that doesn't answer my question,' said Carrie. She took off her hat and put it on the table in the living room, then hung her shawl on the hook by the door. She knew they were watching her and she ignored them as they followed her into the living room. Picking up the string bag of food she held it out to Florrie. 'Mrs Coyle gave me these things for you. She said she hoped they would help. There's stuff in there I can't even pronounce. Look.'

Florrie tut tutted and waved her hand towards Carrie. 'Never mind about that. Mr Bateman's going to India and he wants you to go with him.'

Elsie snorted with laughter at Florrie's frankness, and Carrie's mouth dropped open.

'What? What are you talking about?' She put her hands on her hips and shook her head, astonished at what her mother was telling her. Then she stared at her father, her eyes imploring him to put a stop to whatever was happening. He averted his eyes, embarrassment and

regret etched across his face. His shoulders slumped and he went back into the scullery as if he couldn't bear to hear anymore. Carrie fixed her eyes on her mother. 'I'm not going to India, or anywhere else with a...a...stranger. How can you even think such a thing? My home is here with you, and Elsie, and Tom and Alfie. And the babbies.' She put her hands on her stomach. 'This baby is your grandchild. Don't you care about that? I don't even know this...person.' She flung her hand in the direction of Bateman. 'And yet you're suggesting I go to India with a man I don't know... you don't know. And I don't give a rat's arse if you know his mother. You know a lot of people but I'm not going to live with them. How shameful would that be, Mum, to live with a man I don't know? You wouldn't do it. You wouldn't expect Elsie to do it, so why the hell should I?'

'That's not the point,' said Florrie. 'The point is you're in the family way and you're unmarried. You've brought shame on this family, Carrie Dobbs, and you owe it to me and your dad to do as you're told. We can't afford to feed you and another baby on less money. It was going to be hard enough with Elsie and her little 'un, and soon you won't be bringing home any money because you won't have a job. Jobs are scarce and you've thrown yours away. No, my girl, what you've brought home is a load of trouble and even more worries for me an' your dad to contend with.' She barely took a breath during her tirade and didn't stop long enough for Carrie to interject. 'And it won't be shameful. Nothing about any of it is shameful except you and what you've done.' She folded her arms across her ample bosom and stared at Carrie with sharp eyes as if daring her to argue. 'Anyway, it's been decided. You and Mr Bateman will be married in two weeks' time.'

Carrie's eyes widened. She turned to look at Elsie who was busy concentrating on her sewing, pretending to take no notice, and then back at Florrie. 'What? Why? Why does he want to marry me, someone he's never met in his life before and take on another man's child? No one else would want to do it. Why is he so different?'

'Because Mr Bateman has a good position in the army, and...as befits that position he should be married but he hasn't met the right person as yet. You'll live in his house in India and run his home, and you will do as you are told. You lost the right to say what you want and what you don't want when you laid down with the son of the people who were employing you, the ones who paid your wages and put food on our table. And you got more than you bargained for with Johan Stern didn't you, a man who doesn't want you and is now married to someone else? So much for him loving you and wanting to make a home with you, Carrie Dobbs!'



SHE LAY ON HER BED, the curtains drawn across the window. Carrie could hear them talking, turning her life upside down, planning her future; planning her baby's future. How dare they, she thought. How dare they take my life and turn any way they want without bothering to ask me what I want. Even Elsie had looked upset which had surprised her. She wished Tom had been there. He would have stood up for her she was sure of it. Maybe he'll try and change their minds, persuade them that what they were planning was a really bad idea. Tom was on her side. He always was. He wouldn't want her to be sent to a country so far away they probably wouldn't see each other again and couldn't even imagine what it was like.

That evening, Florrie called Carrie down from her room to explain some of the strange food she'd brought home from the Sterns.

'It's a good job you brought this home, our Carrie. We had nothing in the cupboard for tomorrow. Trouble is I don't know what half of it is. Couldn't you have brought something we're used to?'

'I didn't get to choose, Mum. Mrs Coyle gave me the bag and that was that. I could hardly say, 'we don't like this or that so give me something else'. It would've been like looking a gift horse in the mouth.' She swallowed hard and shuffled her feet. 'Anyway, I would have thought you'd be alright now,' she said in a low voice. 'What's Mr Bateman giving you to buy me? Surely you're not giving me to him for nothing. Even I must be worth something.'

Florrie lifted her hand and slapped Carrie across the face. As Carrie held her smarting cheek, her mouth open with shock. Florrie looked directly into her eyes. 'You should think yourself lucky someone was willing to take you on, my girl,' she said in a low voice. 'Now, I don't want to hear any more about it, do you understand?' Carrie reached for the damp dishrag and held it against her cheek, still burning from her mother's slap. It was the first time Florrie had hit her with such force. 'You're getting married at the big church in Whitechapel. Mr Bateman has provided for a wedding dress and for some food afterwards at The Royal Oak. You'll sail for India the week after. You'll need to get your things together, the things you want to take with you, not that you've got much...a small case, that's all. Go back to Nightingale Lane tomorrow and tell them you're leaving, and for God's sake don't tell them why. And don't forget to pick up your wages. Your dad and me are going to need every penny seeing as we won't be getting any more money from you from then on.'



DURING THEIR EVENING meal no one spoke. Carrie tried to catch Arthur's eye but his focus was on his plate. He'd allowed himself to be railroaded by Florrie, who, even though he had always said was a down to earth good woman, the salt of the earth, was the driving force behind any decision made when it concerned their family and their home. He was rarely allowed an opinion on anything unless it coincided with Florrie's, and if he disagreed with anything she said, she would send him to Coventry for weeks during which time he would become so miserable and downhearted he would decide it wasn't worth the aggravation and agree with her anyway.

He didn't like Sergeant-Major Bateman. Arthur knew a bad 'un when he saw one, and even after the briefest of meetings he was sure Bateman was a man not to be trusted. His heart was breaking, and he had such a lump in his throat because of the pain he felt at deceiving his beloved youngest daughter he couldn't speak. He knew he should have taken Carrie aside and given her a way out, but he couldn't. Florrie would have made his life hell. She had been so quick to take Bateman's offer of marriage to Carrie they hadn't even asked him his Christian name. All they knew was that he had achieved a reasonable position in the army and his reward was a posting to India, a foreign country they knew nothing about. If he'd been posted to the moon Florrie couldn't have been less interested. As long as it was away from Whitechapel, the place where they had lived all their lives and made their home when they'd married, and all the people they knew which was most of the community, she wasn't bothered where it was.

Part of him felt ashamed. He was ashamed because he knew he should have stood up to Florrie; told her she was wrong to send their youngest daughter away to God knows where. He knew it was possible they might never see Carrie again. The thought of it devastated him. Carrie had always been his favourite child. He admired her gumption and her quick wit, so unlike himself. And he knew deep down that his daughter was a good person. She'd made a mistake, allowed herself to be led on, believed Johan Stern when he'd told Carrie he loved her. He knew in his heart she wasn't the first girl to have been treated so shabbily and she wouldn't be the last. Yes, he was disappointed; if it had been Elsie he might have accepted it better, but he didn't feel Carrie's lack of judgment which was probably down to her naivety warranted her being sent away. He and Carrie had always been close, and now, at a time when she needed him most, when she needed support and guidance from her parents, he had turned his back on her. He got up from the table and went into the

scullery, carefully placing his plate and cutlery in the soapy water, then opened the door to the yard.

‘Arthur?’ Florrie called out.

‘I’m going out,’ he answered gruffly. As he went to close the door he heard her complaining about him behind his back.

‘S’pose he’s off down the pub. He shouldn’t be squandering what little we have on beer. It’s all right for some.’

He sighed, then continued into the yard and out onto the back path with a heavy heart.



Chapter 5

Florrie Dobbs carefully ran her hand down the bodice of the ivory and mint green silk and lace dress hanging against the door. She reached for the scalloped hem and held out the full skirt, admiring the way the early morning light streaming through the window fell on the diaphanous fabric making it shimmer like spun gold. She let it fall and watched it billow like a cloud against the door as though in slow-motion. A surge of regret went through her. She shook her head to rid herself of the feelings she knew she mustn't have, the destructive thoughts that would ruin all of her plans and make her look weak in front of the family. And that couldn't happen because she was the only one who would make sure things were as they should be.

She sighed and folded her arms. Her thoughts went to her own wedding day to Arthur, and how little they'd had to be satisfied with, then and since. Everything had been such an uphill struggle for them; they'd never had enough money to live on, and it had got even harder when the kids had arrived. Of course, only she had known she was pregnant with Elsie when she and Arthur had walked down the aisle of the same church where Carrie and Mr. Bateman would marry. She remembered they had been teased mercilessly by their family and friends when she'd announced she was pregnant a short time after the wedding. There had been lots of ribbing about Arthur's prowess in the bedroom. Elsie smiled to herself, remembering how embarrassed Arthur had been. It was true enough though. She'd never had any complaints on that score. Elsie had been called a honeymoon baby and had come early. That's what they'd told everyone and it's what everyone had believed. Elsie had been small and rather pale when she came into the world, and it had helped Florrie keep her ruse going. And Arthur had never guessed why she'd been so keen for them to marry when they did. He'd just gone along with things, like he always did.

Florrie sat on the end of her bed and looked up at the dress that Carrie would wear at her own wedding. Carrie's such an ungrateful little wretch, she thought. It was only thanks to Florrie that she had the chance of a future and yet she was behaving as though it was a punishment. Carrie didn't know how lucky she was. Her daughter had made a mistake that affected the whole family, and she, Florrie, had simply taken the only steps she could to ensure no shame would be heaped on them. She'd heard about girls in Carrie's position, known women whose daughters had fallen prey to the sons of families for

whom they worked. It never ended well. Many were ostracised by their families, often sinking into destitution after having been kicked out of the family home. Numerous young women were driven to walk the streets looking for punters, handing their babies over to unsuitable carers so they could earn a few shillings lying on their backs. She didn't want that for Carrie. People had long memories in Whitechapel, and there was no way she would allow her to bring a disgrace on the family that would stain its reputation for generations to come.

She knew Carrie was angry with her, and she acknowledged that if her mother had tried to marry her off to a stranger and sent her away she would have felt the same, but she'd married the boy next door, the one she'd sat next to in class until she left school at the age of twelve. Arthur was always the one for her, and even though it was clear to her he was devastated at losing his favourite daughter, she knew he would forgive Florrie in time. They would get through it like they'd got through everything else; the scrimping and scraping, the going hungry, the outbreak of war, Elsie's husband being called up after only a few months of marriage, and the certainty that if the war didn't end soon her own two boys would go the same way.

She took the dress from the door and holding it against her body stood in front of the mirror. She smiled at her reflection. She'll be alright, she thought. She'll be alright.



Chapter 6

Carrie and Sergeant-Major Bateman stood under the stone archway of the church door. The ceremony had been short and to the point, each saying their vows by rote, neither infusing the declarations with any meaning. There was very little congregation; just Carrie's family and her new husband's mother. There were also a few men from Bateman's regiment, but he didn't bother to introduce her to them. Arthur had given her away as was expected of him, but his miserable expression indicated how he felt. This wasn't the wedding he had imagined for his youngest daughter; he knew he was leading her to a life of uncertainty and very likely misery. Pearl followed them sedately up the aisle, Carrie's only bridesmaid. When Carrie had joined her intended at the altar she turned to give Pearl her flower posy. Their eyes met across the pretty mix of lily of the valley, freesia and gypsophila, Carrie's full of apprehension, Pearl's full of tears.

While they waited for the vicar to begin the ceremony, Carrie turned to Sergeant-Major Bateman. 'I don't even know your name,' she said quietly.

He lifted his chin and linked his fingers together in front of his stomach. 'Arnold,' he said staring straight ahead. 'My name's Arnold, after my grandfather.'

Carrie turned to face the altar and swallowed hard. 'Thank you.'

He nodded once. 'You're welcome.'

Afterwards, they gathered at The Royal Oak, a spit-and-sawdust pub that catered mostly for men from the docks and soldiers home on leave from the front. It was a place that Carrie had never entered in her life before, and probably never would have if it hadn't been for Arnold Bateman. Inside it was gloomy and smelt predominantly of cigarette smoke and spilt beer. Everything was stained ochre yellow, even the worn tapestry seats and the curtains which were thick with dirt and held back with red tassels stiff with dust. Carrie's heart sank. This wasn't the kind of place she had dreamed about or ever imagined she would have her wedding breakfast. She glanced at Arnold. And he certainly wasn't the man who had occupied her thoughts and dreams night after night.

Arnold went straight to the bar with his mates and ordered whisky for each of them. Florrie opened the door to the snug and poked her head into the room. Carrie glimpsed a table covered in a deep red chenille tablecloth, a few plates of sandwiches and tiny cakes dotted on the top. She looked up at Pearl who reached for Carrie's hand and

held it tight.

'What have I done, Pearl?' she whispered, leaning her head against Pearl's shoulder.

Pearl shook her head. 'I don't know, Carrie but it's not looking good. Isn't there anywhere you can go, somewhere to get you away from all this? I don't know what the hell Florrie was thinking when she agreed to it.' She rubbed Carrie's back affectionately. 'At least you're a married woman now,' she whispered. 'That means you'll get some respect wherever you go. It's not like before when you were a girl with a bun in the oven and no man to stand beside you. And you could make up a story...say your husband's been killed in the war. People would believe that. There's plenty of them perishing at the front, isn't there?'

Carrie looked up into her friend's face. 'But I've no money. How will I look after the baby with no money?'

'What about your wages? There must've been a couple of weeks-worth with leaving pay.' Carrie looked over to Florrie. Pearl lifted her chin and tutted. 'Right. Got those too, has she?'

The landlady, a black-haired woman as wide as she was tall wearing a brown dress and cheap paste earrings came out from behind the bar and approached Florrie.

'You can go in now, Mrs. It's all ready. Mr. Bateman's paid so it's been taken care of.' Florrie nodded and beckoned the others into the snug. Carrie let go of Pearl's hand and walked towards Florrie with a heart as heavy as lead. A fluttering inside her made her gasp and she placed a hand on her stomach to let her baby know she had felt it. Suddenly a surge of love went through her. She had felt the baby's movements before of course, but for the first time since discovering she carried Johan's child she experienced a bond between her and her baby; an invisible unbreakable cord of steel that seeped into every cell of her body, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. She wasn't just one person anymore. The baby she nurtured within her own body was the most important person in that drab little room in the Royal Oak, a place devoid of any real sense of occasion and so lacking in warmth. Carrie knew from that moment that whatever happened she wasn't alone. Her eyes went to Arnold again and her heart sank. He wasn't an attractive man. His age was difficult to place but Carrie guessed at around thirty. He was quite tall, almost six feet, and his body slender with no obvious muscle. His fair hair was very thin; she could see his pink scalp shining through the greasy strands where he'd combed it carefully into place. The skin on his neck was mottled with tiny bloodspots where the shaving blade had nicked him. She thought of Johan's thick dark hair and the way it curled over his collar, and his hard well-toned body when he'd held her to him. Her

chest tightened. I mustn't think of him like that, she thought. He can't help me now. Even if he wanted to.

The other guests squeezed into the snug and Florrie encouraged them to take a plate and help themselves to the sandwiches now stiff and curling at the corners. Arnold Bateman and his mates joined them briefly, but were eager to get back to the bar. Carrie watched him from the door then looked back into the snug where her mother was holding court. Florrie held her china teacup between finger and thumb, her little finger raised the way she imagined all well-to-do ladies drank their tea. Her father sat in the corner of the snug nursing a beer. He looked like he was at a wake mourning the passing of someone dear to him, not celebrating his daughter's wedding. Elsie sat next to him. She looked ready to drop and kept shifting her swollen body from one buttock to the other on the hard, straight-backed chair. Tom and Alfie stood by her, leaning against the wood panelling, their eyes darting first to Florrie then to Mrs Bateman as the two women chewed the fat over their good fortune. The boys wore the same miserable expression as Arthur, their faces gaunt and pale, mirroring their wish of being somewhere else, anywhere but there. They held jugs of watered-down cider; a previously unbroken rule written by Florrie that her boys would never drink alcohol in public, relaxed that day because of the special occasion. They sipped at the jugs without enthusiasm.

Pearl sat next to Carrie and smiled at her. Her eyes locked on to Carrie's and the two girls knew this was their final moment together.

'I have to leave now, Carrie. I've to go Nightingale Lane tonight to cover your shift now that you've left. I think Mrs Coyle is planning to take someone on in your place. They've been seeing girls.' She screwed up her face. 'Funny looking lot.' She tutted. 'No one I'd want to share our room with, that's for sure.' Her eyes filled with tears and she grasped Carrie's hand. 'I wish you weren't leaving, Carrie,' she whispered. 'I don't know what I'm going to do without you.'

'Do you think they know why I've left? Mrs Coyle looked a bit suspicious when I told her I was leaving.'

Pearl shook her head. 'Now don't go fretting about that,' she said, patting Carrie's hand. 'Whatever they're thinking it'll last as long as yesterday's newspaper, and then they'll find someone else to talk about. Anyway, no one's said anything to me and if they do I'll shoot them down in flames.' She grinned at Carrie, trying to lighten the moment, then tightly grasped Carrie's hand again. 'You will write to me, won't you, Carrie? I know you'll be a long way away, but we'll still be best friends, won't we? And I want you to be my bridesmaid, don't forget. I couldn't have anyone else but you, and William agrees with me.'

Carrie smiled, wondering how she could be Pearl's bridesmaid once she was over the other side of the world. 'Of course I'll still be your bridesmaid. I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'll never forget you, Pearl, no matter what happens. You're closer to me than my own sister.' She glanced around the snug. 'Than anyone really. I'm going to miss you so much.'

Pearl's eyes glistened. 'Me too.' She leant forward to whisper in Carrie's ear. 'If he's horrible to you or makes you do things you don't want to do, you just come and live with me and William after we're married. He wouldn't mind, he's a good man, and we'd both rather that than be worried about you in another country. Promise me, Carrie. Promise me.' She gripped Carrie's hands.

'I promise you, Pearl.' Pearl kissed her on the cheek then turned away and left the public house with Carrie staring after her, wishing she could follow her, wanting everything the way it had been before, and that she too was going with Pearl to Nightingale Lane where life had been so simple. Her thoughts went to Johan and her stomach lurched. And if she hadn't been so silly...thinking that someone like Johan would actually love her. Everyone had said he'd used her. It just hadn't felt like that at the time. She closed her eyes and wished she were somewhere else, anywhere but in a grimy pub that stank of cigarettes and stale beer. As she opened her eyes again Arnold Bateman filled her vision. This man was her husband, the man she'd just married, not for love like she'd always dreamed of, but for convenience, and not her own but her mother's.

'Carrie!' Florrie called her from across the snug. She'd had a sherry or two and her cheeks were flushed bright red. 'Mrs Bateman says you're to go home with her tonight. She's made up a room for you and Mr Bateman...Arnold.' She looked at Mrs Bateman and smiled ingratiatingly, 'And you'll stay there until you go to India.'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, I want to come home, Mum. I haven't packed my things or anything. And I'd like to spend another night at home...with you, Dad and the family.'

Florrie pushed a small worn leather case forward with her foot. 'I packed your case for you. Everything you'll need is in there. You're a married woman now, Carrie. You have to live in your husband's house, and that's with Arnold and Mrs Bateman.'

'But...I don't know them.' Her face was contorted with distress as she begged her mother. 'They're strangers, Mum. Please let me stay with you tonight.'

'No buts. It's how it is so it's best if you get used to it early on. You'll be leaving for India soon, and you can visit us at Hanbury Street to say goodbye. Then you can write as often as you want, if you get the time.' She smiled at Arnold Bateman again, and nodded to his

mother.

Carrie looked down. Nausea swept through her when she realised her life with her family was over. She sighed heavily and glanced up again. Arthur, Tom and Alfie were staring at her. She looked at them, hoping her eyes would tell them how she felt. She glanced into the bar. Arnold Bateman was playing a drinking game with his friends, oblivious to her misery. He'd barely looked at her since they'd left the church. I'm just a thing, she thought. Someone to make him look good in front of his superiors. And someone to warm his bed. She shuddered at the thought. She looked back at her father and brothers who were still staring at her. She loved them so much, wanted to run to them and cling on to them hoping they could save her, but she knew by the expression on their faces even they had acknowledged she was lost to them, and there was nothing they could do for her now.



CARRIE STOOD ON THE pavement behind Arnold and Dolores Bateman as they wrestled with the old front door of their house in Pratt Street in Camden. Arnold put his knee against it and when it still didn't budge, shoved it with his shoulder. A sound like a lightning strike ripped through the door as it split down the middle.

'For Christ's sake,' cried Arnold as the door fell in two. 'What a homecoming. I thought you'd spoken to the landlord about this, Mother.'

'I did mention it, Arnold, when he came for the rent last, but he didn't want to know. He said if we were that worried we'd do something about it ourselves.' She gathered herself up and took a deep breath before speaking. 'You did know about it, son. It's been needing a mend for months.'

'Yeah, well, I'm going to have to now, aren't I?' He gathered up the bits of wood and threw them bad-temperedly into the front sitting room. He looked crossly at Carrie. 'P'raps you could make yourself useful and brew some tea. You can see how we're placed here and there are no free rides. Me and Mother expect you to pull your weight until we go to India. And don't be using that baby you're carrying as an excuse to be idle. We're a bit sharper than that, aren't we, Mother?'

Dolores nodded and patted her son's shoulder. 'We certainly are, son. That's right, Carrie, listen to your husband. You'll know the scullery when you see it. Off you go.' Arnold threw back his head and laughed, then grinned at Dolores. 'And when you've done that you can help me make up the bed in Arnold's room. The sheets are still on the line in the yard. You can get them off and run an iron over them to

dry them.'

Carrie put her case on the floor, took off her coat and laid it across an old moquette chair with wooden arms. 'Is there anything else you'd like me to do while I'm at it?'

Arnold straightened his back and narrowed his eyes. 'Don't use your smart tongue with us, Carrie Dobbs...and yes, in my eyes you are still a Dobbs. We've heard all about your independent nature and flippant remarks. And we also know what kind of a girl you are. Don't we, Mother?' Dolores nodded and Arnold continued his diatribe. 'We run a traditional and respectable house here, unlike your own it would seem.' He sniggered and Carrie threw him a look of utter loathing. 'You'll earn your keep while you're here. This is no meal ticket for you, Carrie Dobbs. You're expecting to eat, I take it?'

Carrie didn't answer him. She stoked the fire in the front sitting room, then unhooked the kettle off the hanger and went into the scullery to fill it with water. While the water heated she set out three cups and saucers on the wooden drainer, then spooned tea into the teapot. When the water had boiled she brought the teapot to the kettle and filled it, covering it with a cosy. She went back into the scullery and put the cups and saucers on a wooden tray, along with a tiny jug of milk and a bowl of sugar. She set the tray down on a table at the side of the fire, then went into the yard and pulled the sheets off the line. They were still damp. She gathered them up and took them into the house, laying them across the wooden chairs in the front sitting room to dry.

Arnold removed his suit jacket and fixed the two pieces of the front door together with a hammer and nails while Dolores went into the backyard to use the privy. Carrie poured tea into the three china cups and sat on one of the wooden chairs to drink hers, leaving the two comfortable chairs by the fire free for Arnold and his mother. When Arnold was happy with his handiwork he threw the hammer onto the table making a loud clunk, then flopped down in one of the chairs. He took his tea from the tray without thanking her. A silence between them followed punctuated only by the sound of the fire crackling in the grate. The snapping and hissing of the damp wood gave Carrie comfort, reminding her of home, and for the first time that day she felt she could relax a little.

When Dolores returned from the yard she took her tea from the tray and sat in the chair opposite Arnold, turning to Carrie.

'Thank you for the tea, Carrie. Perhaps when the bedding is aired you could help me with the bed.'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, of course I'll help you, Mrs Bateman.'

Arnold glanced at his mother and frowned. 'Getting soft in your old age, Mother?' He threw back the dregs of his tea, then looked at

her through narrowed eyes.

'Manners cost nothing, Arnold. Carrie has come here as your wife. She isn't a servant.'

He got up and shrugged on his coat. 'She bloody well ought to be after what I paid. And to think...it was me doing them a favour.' He threw a look of scorn in Carrie's direction, then went to the buckled front door and tried to open it, getting cross because it wouldn't budge. 'I'm going back to the pub. My mates are returning to the front tomorrow. I want to wish them well.' He went out of the thrown-together door and pulled it closed behind him without waiting for a response.

It was growing dark in the sitting room. Dolores got up and lit three candles, placing them around the room. She beckoned Carrie to sit in the chair Arnold had vacated.

'Come and sit with me in front of the fire, Carrie. It's very cold tonight. I thought once March and the beginning of April were out of the way we'd get some decent weather, at least good enough not to have to keep feeding the fire. Getting the wood is becoming more difficult. I don't know what we'll do if the war goes on too long.'

Carrie settled herself in the soft cushioned chair. Her swollen stomach felt unwieldy and uncomfortable and she was grateful for the offer. 'Thank you, Mrs Bateman. I don't want to be any trouble.'

Dolores leant forward. 'You can call me Ma if you like. I expect you wish you were with your own family, sitting with your own mother next to your own fire, but it is the way of us. If you marry a man in these parts you must live in his house. Do you understand?' Carrie nodded. 'I love my son, Carrie, he's the only son I have, but he doesn't know how to treat a woman. Arnold learnt everything at his father's knee and I'm afraid my husband didn't know how to treat a woman either. He was a bully like many men, and I'm afraid my son has grown to be just the same.'

Carrie's eyes grew wide with horror and her heart sank even lower. 'Could I not stay here with you when Arnold goes to India? I'm afraid Mrs Bate...Ma. I don't know this new country we're going to, and I don't know what it will be like there. I could stay with you, couldn't I, and help you in the house until the baby comes. I promise you I won't be any trouble. You won't even know I'm here. Please say I can.'

'I'm afraid not, Carrie. I know you're frightened, any young girl would be, but Arnold married you so you could accompany him to India as his wife. He has done well has Arnold for all his faults, and his position requires him to have a stable home life with children. It means you'll have a better house at the garrison. Your job will be to support Arnold in every way, and to entertain his guests. Arnold wants to be in a position of power and he needs you to help him get there by

being a good wife. A very good wife.' She lowered her eyes to her cup, then glanced up at Carrie lowering her voice to an embarrassed whisper. 'You'll be expected to be his wife in every way, you know.'

Carrie leant back against the chair and closed her eyes. Arnold's thin, mottled face and lank fair hair loomed in front of her. The thought of sharing a bed with a man she'd met only twice, of having his hands on the most intimate parts of her body filled her with revulsion. She opened her eyes again to find Dolores Bateman staring at her.

'You must be strong, Carrie. You'll have to be very strong.'



Chapter 7

The candle flickered in the sparsely furnished bedroom, throwing large misshapen shadows onto the walls. Carrie undressed quickly and pulled on a flannelette nightdress and a knitted night coat. It was very cold; any warmth thrown out by the fire in the front sitting room seemed to get no further than the middle stair. Above it was bitter, even colder than Hanbury Street and nowhere near as comfortable. Carrie had always been aware of her humble beginnings because of the luxurious surroundings of Nightingale Lane, but she had to acknowledge her parent's house may have been shabby, but it was clean, homely and welcoming. Dolores had kindly given her an old pottery hot water bottle to warm the bed, and as Carrie slipped between the freshly laundered sheets she relished how wonderful it felt on her legs and body, a small comfort for which she was grateful.

Arnold hadn't returned from the pub and Carrie was glad. She'd purposely not blown out the candle because she didn't want him fumbling about in the dark and losing his temper when he came into the bedroom. She lay with the sheet and blankets pulled up to her chin and wondered how convincing an act she could pull off pretending to be asleep. What Dolores had said had frightened her. She had told her plainly that Arnold would expect her to fulfil her wifely duties, and she knew exactly what that meant. She turned on her side and snuggled down into the bed. Dolores had surprised her. It seemed that when Arnold was around she turned into a harridan and treated her the way Arnold did...like a servant, or at the very least an unwelcome guest. When they were by themselves Dolores was motherly and kind.

Carrie thought of Florrie and compared the two women. Florrie hadn't even talked to her about the baby, or asked her how she was coping during her pregnancy, a show of concern she had hoped for regardless of the situation. Carrie was her daughter after all. She wished Florrie had put her arms around her to comfort her, or spoken to her about what would happen during her confinement and birth, anything to show that she cared about her youngest daughter. Arthur seemed anxious not to go near her, particularly in front of Florrie. He was usually so affectionate towards her, they'd always had a close bond, but he had become a quiet, pale shadow of the man he was, and had barely spoken to her since she had told them about the baby. Carrie knew Florrie was angry with her. Not just disappointed...but angry. And she knew why. It was money. It was always about money.

And Carrie understood. Florrie had endlessly had to make a little go a long way, and since the outbreak of war the expectation had been even greater. At present there was Arthur, Tommy and Alfie bringing in a wage to add to the pot, albeit a very small one. With the continuation of the war she would not only have lost Carrie's contribution but also theirs when the time came, which meant she would be down to one meagre wage of a few shillings to pay the rent and to feed three adults and a new baby. Carrie couldn't help wondering how much money Arnold Bateman had given Florrie. Regardless of much it was Carrie hoped it was worth losing her daughter for. She shook her head with sadness and promised her unborn child that if the baby was a girl and found herself in a similar situation Carrie would stand by her, no matter what the gossips said. She wondered at Florrie's love for her and how easily she had found it to let Carrie go.

Although unsaid Carrie felt Dolores seemed to understand Carrie's struggle with what had happened to her. She wondered why she was being so kind. In one week she and Arnold would board a ship and sail across the ocean to a country she had only seen in her atlas, and only then because she had searched for it out of curiosity about her future home. It was so far away. She had traced her finger from the little black spot on the paper that had "London" written next to it, and followed a route across the world to India. She looked at the expanse of blue and the huge spread of continent between the two countries and thought she may as well have been travelling to another planet, realising at that moment it was possible, probable, she would never see her loved ones again. Then it dawned on her. Dolores knows her son, she thought, and she can't wait to see the back of him. She doesn't like him. What did she say before...Arnold learnt everything at his father's knee, and her husband was a bully? Dolores knows I'm going to have a horrible life with Arnold. She feels pity for me. It's why she's trying to soften things while I'm here.

Carrie buried her face into the pillow and sobbed until there were no more tears. As she cried she thought of her mother and father, and of Tom, the brother she had been so close to but who already felt a million miles away. She thought of Johan, of all the promises they had made to each other when he had held her close and told her he loved her. And she thought of Pearl, the most wonderful friend anyone could ever have. These were her people, her loved ones. She would soon leave them behind to begin a journey she didn't want, a voyage into the unknown to a country with strange customs, and with people she had never met and would likely be nothing like her. It was like a nightmare she would never wake from.



Chapter 8

Carrie stood at the dockside amongst the throng of passengers waiting to board The City of London clutching a small carpet bag. The noise of the chattering travellers was deafening, and the men loading supplies and luggage onto the ship shouted to each other above the hubbub making a huge din. Hoists rising high above the crowd deposited trunks and containers onto the decks for the crew to decant into the hold. Shrieking children ran around their mother's skirts, nannies pushed prams up and down the walkways attempting to comfort their charges, and young women stood detached from the maelstrom, just like Carrie, looking lost and alone, their faces pale, their eyes wide with anticipation...and fear.

Arnold was in the port office with their paperwork, waiting for it to be verified before they sailed. She watched him through the small square window in the door. He was laughing, sharing a joke with the officer who stamped their papers. Over the last few days she had tried to find something about Arnold she could like, a kind word of encouragement, a gentle gesture of concern for her and the baby, but he had shown her no warmth or concern whatsoever. He hadn't smiled at her once since their wedding. She was sure that he hated what was happening to them as much as she did, but because being married would give him a certain status he had decided it was worth any problems she may bring with her. She wondered why he hadn't met someone who could be a real wife to him, someone who could love him and play the part more convincingly than she was sure she could. She glanced through the glass again and she understood. She thought about Pearl and how much she loved William. She didn't care that he'd worked on the docks or been a bookie's runner. She just loved him with all her heart. Out of all the girls Carrie knew, Pearl understood how to pick a good bloke, and she probably wasn't the only one. These girls didn't look at what men did for a living because in Whitechapel and beyond in the neighbouring districts they all did the same things. They went for someone who took their eye and could return the love they gave, a man who was easy-going and kind and who wouldn't raise his hand to them or their children. Like Arthur. Like her dad. She finally worked out why Arnold hadn't been chosen by someone else. She had to acknowledge her husband was the most unappealing, unlikeable man she had ever met.



DOLORES HAD CONTINUED to treat Carrie with kindness, but only when Arnold wasn't in the house. Clearly, she was wary of him, and if she had any cause to be severe with Carrie because Arnold expected it, she would always glance at her afterwards with a look of regret. Carrie had accepted it all with stoicism. In her heart, she wanted to find the courage to rail against the circumstances that had been forced on her, but after a good deal of introspection she had come to realise that there was nothing she could do. Arnold was her husband and she would have to do whatever he wanted. He owned her, had paid for her, and now she must do his bidding. He reminded her daily of her vows, to love, honour and obey, particularly the obey word which he emphasised. Fortunately he had not yet claimed his rights over her body. Every evening he would leave the house at seven and not return until after closing time, usually worse for wear. She made sure she was asleep before he returned, and if she wasn't she would pretend to be. Dolores also went to bed early to avoid him. Carrie found herself envying her. Dolores slept in her own bedroom with the door shut, and at least when Carrie and Arnold went to India there would be an end to her misery.

Arnold joined her on the dockside. He folded the papers precisely with his pale thin fingers and placed them into a battered brown leather attaché case, which made him feel important. Carrie had been amused when she saw the case and had wanted to giggle, but knew she mustn't for fear of Arnold losing his temper with her. One of Mrs. Coyle's sayings was, 'Keep 'em sweet, girls. It's how to get the best out of a man. Let him think he's the boss and keep him sweet.'

'Our papers are in order,' he said. 'We have an interior cabin, not as well-appointed as a captain's billet, but it'll be adequate for our needs.' He glanced down at her. 'For God's sake, Carrie, buck up. At least make an effort to look like the wife you're meant to be even if you don't feel it. It's important that you try to be cordial with the wives of the men in my unit. They'll be doing their best to fit in socially with the others bearing in mind their husband's position and will be expected to behave respectfully and dutifully. You must do the same.' She stared at him and said nothing. He bent towards her, his face level with hers. 'I suggest you make the best of this, Miss. The alternative will not be pleasant, let me assure you,' he said through gritted teeth.

He straightened up then took her arm firmly, leading her towards the roped gangway which would take them onto the ship. On deck Carrie's heart dropped at the sight of so many people she didn't know.

Many were in groups, obviously enjoying the opportunity to mix with their friends, relishing the thought of an exciting new adventure in a foreign country.

Arnold steered her towards a gathering of soldiers and young women. One of the men spotted them as they approached.

‘Arnold. There you are. We wondered where you’d got to. Thought you chickened out, man.’

Arnold laughed. ‘What me? Never.’

‘Aren’t you going to introduce us, Arnold?’ said one of the girls, eyeing Carrie.

‘Oh, yes. Er, everyone. This is my...wife, Caroline Violet.’ Carrie smiled and nodded to them, wondering why Arnold had used her full name and not just the one she had always been known by.

‘How long have you been married, Arnold?’ asked one of the other girls. ‘Can’t have been very long. You weren’t married the last time we saw you. That can only be what...four, five months ago, you know, at the Christmas get-together. You never mentioned a fiancée.’

Arnold nodded. ‘Carrie...Caroline Violet and I got married last week. We’re newly-weds.’

‘Really,’ the girl said, looking pointedly at Carrie’s stomach. ‘Congratulations, I’m sure.’ She turned her back to Carrie and said something out of the side of her mouth that Carrie couldn’t hear and which made the others in the group laugh. Carrie glanced up at Arnold who looked cross. He grabbed her arm and pulled her away.

‘I think we should find our cabin,’ he said coldly. ‘And in future perhaps you could try to conceal your pregnancy. We don’t want everyone making assumptions, do we?’

She frowned, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling with anger. ‘What assumptions could they make? I’m eight months pregnant. How can I hide it, Arnold? All you seem to be worried about is what your precious friends think. Well, it might come as a huge surprise to you but I couldn’t care less what they think. If you were that concerned you shouldn’t have married me, but you did, so you’re stuck with me, aren’t you?’

She turned away from him, hating him more with every second that passed. He let go of her arm and strode ahead, searching the numbers on the doors for the cabins.

‘We’re on the wrong deck. We need to go down one. I s’pose you’ll be alright to get there by yourself while I look for it? I can move faster on my own and I have to check in with my commanding officer before we sail.’

She sighed. ‘What number is it?’

‘Thirty-two.’

She shrugged and stared at him glassily. ‘I might be pregnant but I

can still count.'

He nodded without looking at her and left her in the corridor to find the cabin herself. She stared after his retreating back; watched him as he arrogantly walked towards the end of the corridor, then turn left to descend the staircase which would take him to the lower deck. The part of the corridor Arnold had left her in was beginning to fill with passengers looking for their own cabins. They smiled at her when they saw her, and she inclined her head to each in a gesture of politeness.

She followed Arnold's steps, taking her time to get to the lower deck which she quickly realised wasn't nearly as pleasant as the one she'd just left. The space was infused with a strange, cloying odour that she didn't quite recognise, a mix of the smell of meat cooking and something metallic, and the décor wasn't as well maintained. The paintwork on the pipes running the length of the corridor was flaking off the metal which was discoloured underneath with rust. The carpet underfoot, although meant to be a rich red was stained and threadbare and coming away from the sides of the floor. When she found the cabin she opened the door gently and looked inside. Their things had been left just by the door and there was no sign of Arnold. She stepped inside and after closing the door sank wearily onto the low bed, glad to be alone at last. Her head was pounding and she released a breath that she felt she'd been holding since she left the Bateman house. Leaning back against the pillows she closed her eyes.



SHE HAD VISITED FLORRIE and Arthur once more before she and Arnold had left for Southampton. Florrie had been awkward with her, talking about everything except Carrie's impending departure. Arthur had kissed her on the cheek before she left, but had been unable to look her in the eye. Her eyes had filled with tears but she'd brushed them away. It was like everything she thought she knew, all that was familiar to her, had never existed. Her parents with whom she had lived all of her seventeen years had become strangers and a stranger had become her husband. She was totally alone. Except for her baby.

She put both hands on her stomach feeling the swelling bump through the fabric of her skirt. Johan's face emerged from her thoughts and her lips twitched into a small smile. He made me happy, she thought. Just for a little while. With a jolt she realised that whatever happened, wherever she landed, a part of Johan would always be with her. Their son or daughter was the unique blend of them both, and nothing could ever change it.

The ship was so vast Carrie was frightened of getting lost on the

huge vessel. Being in a third-class berth wasn't unpleasant; they had a porthole in their cabin which gave her a view of the outside even if it was just the line between sea and sky, but as she explored the ship she became acutely aware of the differences between the level where her and Arnold's cabin was situated, and the first-class cabins that were on the higher decks. She realised that even on a ship the distinctions between Carrie and the beautifully dressed ladies on the upper deck were the same as when they passed each other on a London street. She admired them and they ignored her. It didn't greatly concern her. It was something she was used to. One of the lessons she had learned by being a maid to a wealthy household was that to the wealthy she had to be out of sight. The only way her employers should know she existed was because of all the things she did to make their life comfortable and not because of anything she hadn't done or because they could see her. She knew how to be invisible.

After a couple of days, she began to get used to life aboard ship, the noises, the smells, the movement as it continued its passage towards their destination; the port of Bombay. As she walked around the ship she said the word over and over. Bombay. Bombay. She loved the way it sounded, of how mysterious it was to her, and gradually she began to wonder with fascination about the place she would soon call home. She knew they would not stay in Bombay, but travel overland from the port by train to the garrison town of Secunderabad, Arnold had told her that much, a canton where military personnel were stationed. This is where Arnold had been posted, and this is where her child would be born and raised.

With Arnold officially on duty with his regiment she often found herself spending her days alone. When the weather was good she would wander up on to the top deck where she could sit and watch as people continued their lives aboard the floating village. Many of the women had already formed friendships and were trying to replicate the life they had had back in England. When the weather was bright, little tables were brought out and covered with fancy tablecloths. The ship's most delicate china would be used to take afternoon tea, and they would order cakes and tiny sandwiches from the kitchens. The wives of Arnold's friends sat at the table and they would compose themselves as though posing for a photograph. They gossiped and giggled, and tried to outdo one another with their huge, feathered hats and lavishly embroidered parasols. Carrie marvelled at their clothes. She had none of these things in her possession and felt like a visitor to a zoo peering into an exotic bird sanctuary.

That afternoon the sea was calm as the ship made its way into the Bay of Biscay between France and Spain. It was the beginning of June and although the sun was beating down on the deck the sea breezes

were very welcome. Loosening her buttons at the neck of her dress, she sat on a deckchair and watched as flocks of seagulls flew down to the glassy stillness of the water, breaking the surface like arrows in flight as they hunted for their next meal. The exotic ladies were in their usual place, sipping tea with a tiny, gloved finger raised, and flirting with the steward who attended them. They giggled mercilessly when his face turned bright red and whispered little comments to one another when he turned away. Carrie smiled to herself when he closed his eyes for a moment, obviously wishing he were somewhere else.

Suddenly, one of the girls left the group and walked towards where Carrie was sitting. She was petite and very slim. Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head in a tumble of curls and she wore a blush pink hat decorated with a veil of net that reached the bridge of her nose, trimmed with a posy of roses on the brim, the petals fluttering in the sea breeze. Her round-toed shoes were dove-grey with a strap around the ankle, and she carried a dove-grey fabric dolly-bag tied with cord fastened to her wrist. She sat in the deckchair next to Carrie and smiled.

‘Hello. I’m Dorothy. What’s your name?’ She held out a hand encased in cream leather gloves buttoned to the middle of her forearm.

Carrie shook her hand. ‘I’m Carrie Dobbs...I...I mean, Bateman.’

Dorothy nodded. ‘I saw you here yesterday afternoon. Why don’t you come and join us? We’re all in the same boat...so to speak.’ She laughed. ‘It’s nice to have someone to talk to, especially when our husbands are working.’

Carrie looked down. ‘Er, thank you for the invitation but...I’m not sure I’d be welcome.’

Dorothy frowned. ‘Why ever not? You’d be as welcome as anyone else.’ Carrie didn’t answer, and Dorothy looked over to the women who had suddenly realised she had left their exclusive group. They turned around on their chairs to see who she was talking to and when they saw it was Carrie their lips curled with scorn. ‘Oh, I see. Look don’t worry about them. They’re very silly women who think they’re a notch above everyone else. Please don’t let it distress you. Who is your husband?’

‘Sergeant-Major Bateman.’

Dorothy raised her eyebrows. ‘Really. Gosh, I must say I didn’t have him down as the marrying kind. In fact I’m not sure any of us did.’

Carrie looked at her. ‘Oh? Why?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. He’s what we would call an army man. You know, married to the army. You must be a very special girl to have caught him. And I see you’re expecting a baby. Arnold must be

delighted.'

'Er, yes...yes, I think he is.'

Dorothy looked at her hard, then took Carrie's hand. 'You know, Carrie, life in India is going to be very different from what you've been used to in London. We've all left our beloved families and friends behind. We've been told we must live there, somewhere most of the girls have never seen before, some of us against our true feelings because our husbands have attained a certain position within their regiments. You should expect a certain level of respect from him and from the other women. They're in the same position that you find yourself in. Your experiences may have been different when you were in England but when we get to India we will all be the same. We are all going to be lonely, we will all cry for our parents, and we will all wish we could go home. Don't isolate yourself. You will need the friendship of other women, particularly when your baby comes.'

Carrie looked down, then glanced up to see Dorothy watching her with sad eyes. 'I might be in the same position as you and your friends,' Carrie answered. 'But I'm not the same as you, Dorothy, or the other girls. Look at my clothes. It marks me out straight away. I have no tea-dresses or beautiful hats, or embroidered parasols. I can't sit with you because I'm not the same. Surely, you can see that. We're a different class. This is how it was in London and this is how it is here. Nothing has changed. Why should they accept me here just because we're on board a ship?' She lifted her chin to the giggling girls who sat together gossiping. 'They wouldn't have spoken to me before, would hardly have known I existed. Why should they now?'

Dorothy sighed. 'Why hasn't Arnold bought you the clothes you will need for the trip? The clothes you had in London will not be sufficient for a life in India, believe me. The climate is brutal. You're his wife. Why is he not showing you the respect you deserve?'

Carrie pulled her hand away from Dorothy's and placing her hand against the small of her back levered herself out of the chair. 'Thank you for talking to me. Yours is the first kind word I've had since we've been aboard the ship. It's cheered me up no end. I hope you enjoy the rest of the voyage and your time in Secunderabad. I think I should go back to our cabin. I need to rest.'

She smiled at Dorothy, and as she walked away tears pooled in her eyes. She brushed them from her cheeks before she got to the gaggle of women who were still teasing the steward. As she walked past them they went quiet. She felt their eyes on her back as she got to the steps leading down to the lower decks.

'That's right,' she heard one of the girls say. 'Back to where you belong.'

Dorothy returned to the table of women and sat down. 'That's

enough of that,' she said in a cross voice. 'You should know better.'

Carrie made her way down the corridor to her cabin. Once inside she sat on the bed and threw her brown straw hat into the corner. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. All she could think about was home. She wished with all her heart that she was back there, listening to Florrie complaining about everything under the sun and the rustle of Arthur's newspaper as he buried himself into it, trying to escape her nagging. She thought of Tom and Alfie and how she and they would laugh together, sharing a joke or playing a card game at the table in their front sitting room. It had been such a poor life, a simple life but she had always felt safe there. At least until they'd know she was pregnant. Since marrying Arnold she hadn't felt as safe as she did then, not for a second. All that she was and all that she knew were gone, and in their place was an acute awareness of not really belonging anywhere.

She rubbed the tears from her face. Dorothy had meant to be kind to her but it had made her feel worse because it had simply highlighted the void between her and the other girls. Now she would be frightened to go up on deck again in case she was ridiculed by them. She would have to stay in her cabin until they reached Bombay, no matter how long it took to get there.



Chapter 9

She woke with a start and leant up on her elbow. For a moment she couldn't quite work out where she was until she heard the creaking of the ship and the noise of seabirds outside the porthole. She licked her dry lips overlaid with a fine mist of salty powder. It covered everything, even their faces as they slept. Arnold lay on his back snoring loudly, his arms flung carelessly above his head.

Moonlight streamed in through the porthole and she looked down at him in the golden ray that highlighted the cabin. Strands of his limp hair hung down by his cheek. An image of him shoving her back on the bed and pushing his fleshy lips against hers played out in her mind's eye and she shuddered. It was a fear she had anticipated since their wedding night, yet he hadn't made any attempt to put his hand on her. This had surprised her because Dolores had made it very clear this was something she should accept with stoicism, no matter how unpalatable it might be to her. The nearest he had come to touching her was when he held her arm in front of the other soldiers and their wives, or when he rolled over in bed and flung an arm against her accidentally. When this happened she moved as far away from him as she could, clutching onto the edge of the bed to stop herself from rolling onto the floor.

She lay back on the bed and stared at the moon. It shone like a huge, gilded orb in the cloudless sky and she thought how beautiful it was. This would be so perfect she thought if Johan were here instead of Arnold. She inhaled in shock as a pain flashed through her and gradually took hold, searing from the middle of her back across her stomach. It got sharper and more intense, taking her breath away. She sat up again, her breath coming in short gasps, her hands on her belly. Gradually the pain faded away and she lay back against the pillows with relief, burying herself under the covers and breathing deeply. The baby wasn't due for another three weeks and she had been confident they would have been settled in their new home in Secunderabad before then. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, thinking about her life aboard ship which had become so solitary, she knew of her own making, without events to break up the time stretching out before her like a long, unbending road. More like a prison sentence, she thought. She wondered about the people she'd seen on deck, the never-ending socialising, sometimes bickering she heard from the other passengers, particularly the women. She had been assured by Arnold that when they got into the Mediterranean Sea

there would be parties in the evening, high jinks the like of which she'd never seen before. She'd wanted to say she wouldn't see them now either because she felt so separated from the other passengers, thanks to him making her feel worthless, and thanks to the spitefulness of his colleagues wives. The previous evening she had heard singing from the deck. They sang songs she knew and would have liked to sing with them but she couldn't find the courage to leave the safety of the cabin and join in. I'd just as well be in the hold with the horses, she thought, for all the company I've had.

The day she'd met Dorothy she had lost the confidence to go up on deck where the air was purer and life was far more interesting despite Dorothy's friendly approach. No matter how pleasant she'd been towards Carrie anyone could see how different they were. Dorothy had been very kind to her, but she was still part of the group of women who looked down their noses at Carrie and their prejudice was difficult to stand up against. They knew what she was. They probably had girls like Carrie working in their houses or in their parents businesses. Dorothy was the kind of elegant woman who would have visited the Stern's home in Nightingale Lane, and she, Carrie, would have been the maid to serve them if the upstairs maid hadn't been available. She imagined Dorothy with Lizabet and Johan, sitting in front of the fire that Carrie would have cleaned and laid in the early hours of the morning while they were still fast asleep in their luxurious beds with the pale green and pink satin eiderdowns, or eating the breakfast she'd prepared. Dorothy was about the same age as Lizabet and the thought made her squirm with humiliation. I wonder if she meant it, Carrie thought, being nice to me in front of the others. Was it just for show or maybe she did it for a dare. How would I know how honest she is? I don't know her.

Another sharp pain flashed down her sides and across her belly. She gasped in shock then drew in a deep breath and waited for it to subside. This time the pain was far more intense and took longer to diminish. She got out of bed and wrapped her knitted housecoat around her, sitting in the hard, upright chair opposite the bed. The garment gave her comfort because it felt and smelt familiar, the washing soda Florrie used for the laundry, the scent of lavender from the bar of soap Pearl had given her for Christmas the year before. She didn't need its warmth, the temperature had risen to a muggy stillness the closer they'd got to the Mediterranean, but it was a remnant of her past reminding her of the time she'd spent at home in the bedroom she shared with Elsie. She hugged it to her. Please don't let this be it, she pleaded. Not now, not on this rusty old ship. She thought of her baby arriving into a world that was totally alien, and felt a stab of pity then of guilt. I'll be the only one who loves my baby, she thought. No

one else will. From now on no one I meet will have a connection to the new life I'm carrying. Not even my husband. And Mum and Dad won't even know they have another grandchild. She pulled her knees up as far as she could towards her belly and curled up on the chair. He or she will be my baby, my flesh and blood, she thought. Not Arnold's, thank God. Who'd want a father such as him? There was no love inside of him; no compassion, no nurturing. No nothing. It was like he was dead inside. Part of her felt sorry for someone who could feel so little and she wondered what had happened to him to make him so uncaring.

The next flash of pain made her cry out. Arnold snorted and stirred, then sat up, sleepily rubbing his eyes, surprised to see her out of bed.

'Why are you out of bed? What's the matter with you?' he said in a monotone voice laced with annoyance at being woken.

Carrie slipped from the chair to the floor and got onto her knees. She hung her head, resting her forehead on the floor, trying to speak through the pain. 'I think...' Her breath came in staccato gasps. 'I think it's the baby.'

'But it's not due yet. How can it be the baby? It must be something else.'

She shook her head, her hair brushing the floor. 'I don't know, Arnold,' she cried. 'Get someone...just get someone.'

Arnold sighed with irritation. 'Are you sure it's the baby? I don't want to bother anyone if it's not necessary. It'll look bad for me if I make a fuss and it's not necessary. Everyone will know about it. Maybe it's seasickness.'

'It's not seasickness. And it'll look a lot worse for you if my baby dies.'

Arnold threw on his jacket and left the cabin, returning a few minutes later with the nurse on duty. The woman smiled at Carrie and helped her to her feet.

'Can you get onto the bed?' Carrie nodded. 'Have your waters broken?'

'No.'

'When was the last contraction?'

Carrie lifted her face and looked at her questioningly, her brows knotted together. 'The last what?'

'The last pain? When did you have the last pain?'

'Just now.' She screamed as another pain took over her body. A few moments later her waters broke, gushing across the floor of the small cabin and the nurse ordered Arnold out of the room.

Your wife's in labour, Sergeant-Major Bateman. You must find somewhere else to stay for tonight.'

Arnold nodded and left the room without saying anything to Carrie. The nurse frowned. 'Your husband seems very nervous, Mrs. Bateman.' Carrie didn't answer her. She wanted to say that if she'd noticed his lack of concern for her it was because he couldn't care less and was more than likely cross because he'd been woken out of his sleep but she knew she mustn't. Arnold would get to hear about it and there would be hell to pay, and at that moment she had more to think about than Arnold and what his friends thought. She was terrified at the loss of control of her own body. She thought of Florrie, and no matter how angry Carrie was with her for forcing her into a situation to which she hadn't agreed, wanted her more than anyone. Her mother should have been with her. It was the way of things. When a baby was being delivered the maternal grandmother would be there. There was no one here on her side, no one to hold her hand and tell her everything was going to be alright. The contractions came one on top of the other leaving her little time to do the breathing the nurse instructed. 'You must try, Mrs Bateman. You'll cope much better if you get some rhythm into your breathing.'

'I am trying,' Carrie panted. 'I am.'

The nurse patted her hand and looked at her sympathetically. 'I know, dear. Just do the best you can.'

At a quarter to eight the following morning Carrie gave birth to a son. It was a moment of utter relief for Carrie...and when she saw her baby boy for the first time, complete and utter love.

'He's so tiny,' she said to the nurse, 'Will he be alright.'

The nurse laid the swaddled baby into her arms and smiled broadly. 'He's premature, my dear. He's smaller than we'd like, but he's a reasonable weight and seems strong. When you get to Bombay you must take him to a hospital and get him checked. And yourself, of course. We're rather limited on board as to the kind of care we can give you. If the authorities had known you were about to give birth it's quite likely you would have had to make the journey to India without your husband and at a later date.'

Carrie smiled. 'You were with me all the way,' she said. 'I felt safe with you and I don't even know your name.'

'Nurse Porter,' she answered. 'Nancy. You did well, Mrs Bateman, with virtually no pain relief. Your little boy is our first birth and very likely the only one. We have no other impending births recorded. Your son is special.'

'Thank you. And it's Carrie. My name's Carrie. Has my husband been told?'

'Yes. We got a message to him. He said he'll drop by as soon as he can.' Carrie nodded. She wondered what his thoughts were now that he had a stepson. She made a bet with herself that the news she had

given birth to a boy had barely caused a ripple in his heart. She was in no hurry to see him.



THE REST OF THE VOYAGE went by in a blur. For the first few days she remained in the cabin as she had before the birth, but as the temperature rose she realised it wasn't healthy for either her or the baby to be cooped up, so she swaddled him lightly and took him up on deck. She kept a look out for the women who had taunted her, and found a deckchair out of the breeze and out of their way. Some of the other passengers stopped to congratulate her, saying they had heard about the birth because it had been the only one on board. Someone asked the baby's name and she looked at them blankly, then felt embarrassed because she hadn't thought of a name. She'd had no one to tell so it hadn't occurred to her. Arnold had shown no interest in the boy and hadn't asked her what she would call him.

'Er, John. Yes, that's his name. John.' They had nodded, and someone had said, 'That's a fine name'. She had been pleased, wondering why she had so suddenly decided on the name, John, then realised that the one person in her mind since the birth had been Johan. She looked down at the slumbering baby and smiled. 'Your name's John,' she said. 'What else would it be? It's perfect for you.'

She looked up and saw Dorothy walking briskly towards her. Carrie's smile slipped from her face and her stomach rolled with anxiety as Dorothy sat on the deckchair next to her.

'I heard you'd had the baby. Can I look?' She gently pulled the blanket back from the baby's head. 'Oh, how sweet. Boy or girl?'

'A boy. John.'

'Oh, that's a nice name.' She glanced at the baby again. 'Gosh, his hair his dark. And Arnold's so fair.'

'Yes, but I'm dark, and so are my family. He must take after my side.'

'Yes, I expect that's what it is. Was it very awful? The birth I mean. One does dread it.'

'It was alright. As painful as you would expect, I suppose. It's worth it in the end.'

'Yes, of course it is. You must be so happy...and Arnold too.'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes...yes we are.'

There was a lull then Dorothy's eyes lit up. 'I've had a marvellous idea. Why don't you join us for tea tomorrow? You can introduce little John to everyone.'

Carrie blanched. 'No...no thank you. I don't mean to be rude, but I don't think it's a good idea.'

‘Why ever not? Don’t worry about the others, I’ll put them in their place. They don’t frighten me.’ She giggled.

Carrie left her seat and wrapped the blanket even tighter around John. ‘Yes, Dorothy, but they’re not very nice to me. I know you mean well, but...we’re different. You know we are. It’s one thing your friends taunting me because of my situation in life, it’s quite another when my new-born baby is in my arms. I know you understand.’

Dorothy got up and stood in front of her. ‘Yes, yes, I do, Carrie. I think you’re a very brave girl. It can’t have been easy for you, giving birth on board. I just wish things were different. I hope you don’t count me as one of those who would be disrespectful to you. I hope we’ll be friends. If there’s anything you need, please let me know.’

Carrie relaxed her shoulders and smiled at her, relieved to be off the hook. ‘Thank you, Dorothy. I’d like us to be friends, too.’ She turned and walked across the deck, her head held high. She clutched John’s tiny body tightly against her. ‘It’s you and me, John,’ she said quietly to him. ‘You and me against the world.’



‘I HEAR YOU’VE BEEN fraternising with Dorothy Tremaine,’ Arnold said as he buttoned his jacket that evening. ‘Think you’re like her, do you? Think you’re one of them?’

Carrie watched Arnold as he smoothed his hand across his head which disturbed the thin strands of greasy hair covering his scalp, now red and peeling with sunburn. She could see his reflection in the mirror and the smirk on his lips. Then he tutted in exasperation as he tried to comb his hair, and Carrie frowned. ‘Fraternising? I’d answer you if I knew what it meant.’

‘You been talking to her, I heard. Making friends.’ He sneered as he said it and her deep dislike of him ran hot through her veins.

‘As a matter of fact she spoke to me, congratulating me on the baby. I do not think we’re alike, I know we are not, and for your information I told her as much.’

Arnold swivelled on his heel, glaring down on her as she sat on the bed rocking John in her arms. ‘What? What did you say to her? You better not have been rude to her, Carrie Dobbs. Her husband’s a captain, a commissioned officer. You’ll start a right royal row if you were insolent. You need to know your place, girl.’

Carrie got up and gently placed John back in the draw, now bedecked with cut-down cotton sheets and blankets that Nancy had found for her and turned to face him, determined not to show she was in any way riled by his rudeness.

‘Well, isn’t that what I just said? I politely thanked her for her kind

words...and her invitation to take tea with her and her friends, but reminded her we are of a different class. She said she understood and that if I needed anything to let her know.'

Arnold narrowed his eyes and turned back to the mirror as he struggled to do up the top button of his jacket. 'Right. Well, we don't need anything so there's no need for you to go cap in hand to Mrs. Tremaine. She's a fine lady, she is. She won't want to have anything to do with you.' He turned to look at her again. 'And neither will the other fine ladies.'

Carrie folded her arms in front of her, wishing he would go and do whatever it was he had to do. 'I already know, Arnold. They've made it quite clear.'

'I'm sure they have. I expect they know all about you.'

Carrie felt her breath catch in her throat. 'What d'you mean by that? What do they know about me?'

'For Christ's sake,' he yelled as he fumbled with his top button. 'Ere, get over 'ere, you're going to have to help me with this.' Carrie stared at him in horror. 'Well, come on, you stupid girl. I haven't got all bloody day. I'm going to be late. It's your bloody fault, keeping me talking.'

She crossed the cabin and stood in front of him, reaching up to the button under his chin. As she tried to get the button in the buttonhole her hand brushed the mottled skin on his neck and she recoiled, swallowing hard to keep her composure. His foul breath laced with alcohol and nicotine reached her as he breathed out, sighing with impatience.

'Have you done it,' he said.

She stepped away from him covering her mouth with her hand. 'Yes.'

He nodded. 'Right. Well. I've got to go.' He made for the door, but she stopped him.

'What did you mean when you said they knew all about me?'

He shrugged. 'They guessed our situation. The lads. They know what you are and they know he's not mine.' He nodded towards the baby.

Tears threatened as she realised any chance of her making friends with any of the other women when she got to India was gone. No one would want to know her for fear of their reputation being tarnished. It was something all classes had in common.

'You told them, didn't you? Why would you do that?'

'Like I said, they guessed. I didn't have to say much. You look what you are, Carrie Dobbs. They know a trollop when they see one. They wouldn't have had to be geniuses to work it out, and they're all a lot cleverer than you.' He turned to go then something occurred to him

and he stopped and looked at her. 'You alright in that department now?'

Her eyes widened. 'Which department?'

He rolled his eyes and gave a low laugh. 'I thought you would have known what I meant, all the experience you've had on your back. I'm your husband. I've got rights.'

Carrie trembled, the threatened tears now running down her cheeks. 'No, I'm not alright in *that* department,' she said, her voice shaking. 'I've just had a baby, or p'raps you hadn't noticed for all the attention you've paid him.'

'Why should I give him any attention? He's not my kid, is he? I know whose he is, though. Your mother told me. Thought I had a right to know. She wasn't impressed, and neither am I. You need to learn to stick with your own kind, so any thoughts of elevating yourself by having friends like Dorothy Tremaine you can get right out of your head, Miss. And as for Johan Stern's bastard, if his own father can't be bothered with him I don't see why I should be. I'll be happier when you've had one of mine. And I won't be leaving it too long. We'll get a better house with more kids in tow, and a bit more pay, so you'd better think about that.'

Arnold slammed the door behind him and Carrie sank onto the bed. She closed her eyes as nausea overwhelmed her, breathing deeply like Nancy had shown her when she was in labour, waiting for the sickness to subside. Feeling stronger she left the bed and knelt on the floor by the draw where John was sleeping peacefully. She gently placed her hand on the soft mound of his little body then bent and kissed his velvety cheek, breathing in his wonderful baby smell. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again she looked determined.

'I have to do something, don't I,' she whispered to him. 'I have to change all this, John, because if I don't Arnold Bateman will ruin our lives forever and I will die of guilt and shame. Don't be frightened, my darling boy. I'll take care of us, I promise.'



Chapter 10

‘Carrie. Carrie!’ Dorothy ran towards Carrie from the officer’s canteen. ‘Carrie,’ Dorothy panted. ‘I haven’t seen you for days. Where have you been hiding? I’d like you to meet Marcus.’ She looked up at her husband proudly. ‘Marcus, this is Carrie Bateman. I told you about her.’

Her husband, Captain Marcus Tremaine trailed behind her. He paused for a moment to light a cigarette, cupping the tip to protect it from the wind sweeping across the deck. He followed Dorothy looking curious, blew out a puff of smoke and nodded to Carrie. ‘I hear you’ve already had an eventful journey, Mrs. Bateman. I hope everything went well.’

Carrie smiled although she was eager to get back to the cabin where she’d left John sleeping. She felt uncomfortable talking to this couple as if she were their equal. ‘Yes, sir. It went well. He’s a lovely baby. Not really given me any trouble yet. I came up on deck to get some air but it’s stifling up here as well. There’s nowhere to go to get away from it.’

‘Yes, even the constant breeze doesn’t take the edge off of the humidity. But I assure you ladies it’s going to get a lot worse. India is always hot and humid, even when it rains.’

‘Have you been to India before, sir?’

‘Yes, when I was a boy. I doubt it’s changed much. Very hot, very sticky. The custard apples are quite nice though.’

Carrie’s eyes widened. ‘Custard apples?’

‘Oh, yes. You’ll be able to pick them off the trees.’

Dorothy giggled. ‘I think Carrie will have far more to think about than picking apples, darling.’

Marcus laughed. ‘Yes, you ladies will be having mint juleps every afternoon and playing whist tournaments I don’t doubt. Far too busy to be thinking about anything else.’

Carrie smiled and lowered her head. She was sure she wouldn’t be drinking mint juleps with the other girls. She hadn’t a clue what a mint julep was and she knew they wouldn’t want her there. She couldn’t think of anything worse. When she looked up Marcus Tremaine was looking at his wife as though she were the only other person on the ship. Carrie could see how much he loved Dorothy, and in truth it was the only thing she envied Dorothy for. She cleared her throat to get their attention. ‘I’d best be getting back to John. I don’t like to leave him for too long on his own. How long do you think it

will be now, sir, before we reach Bombay? I'm keen to have John checked by a doctor, just to make sure he's alright before we begin the rest of our journey.'

'We'll probably load up again in Port Said before we go down the Suez Canal, and be required to wait for an escort, so that could take a day or more. Then the ship will go across the Red Sea to Aden, then on to Bombay. I'm afraid it'll be at least a week, Mrs Bateman. Actually I think we've made very good time. The wind must have been in the right direction. I'm sure we'll all be glad to get off this ship and on to dry land.'

'Yes, sir, I'm looking forward to it.'

'There's no need to call Marcus, sir when we're talking, Carrie,' Dorothy said, touching Carrie's arm. 'We're all friends together and we will all be living closely together even though he's your husband's commanding officer when they're on duty. Please call us Marcus and Dorothy.' Carrie smiled and nodded, then left the couple on the deck and made her way to the cabin. She inhaled a deep breath then released it slowly, steadying herself. She found meeting the other people on the ship such a trial, particularly when someone as kind as Dorothy tried to put her at her ease. She was so used to serving people she didn't know whether she should bob a curtsy to them. If Dorothy and Captain Tremaine had been visitors to Nightingale Lane it would have been something she would have been expected to do if she'd run into them for any reason. In fact the Sterns made it quite clear that downstairs staff weren't permitted upstairs when they had guests. Not even Mrs. Coyle. She knew Dorothy was being kind, but her familiarity and friendliness made Carrie anxious. Arnold had already warned her to stay clear of her and to know her place, and this was what she had been attempting to do. It seemed that Dorothy had other ideas. I'll have to keep below deck from now on, she thought. If it's going to be a week before we get to Bombay I'll need to be careful. It's just too risky to go up on deck when everyone else is there and I don't want to get on the wrong side of Arnold. I need to stay as far out of his way as possible or there's no telling what he'll do.



Chapter 11

It was the smell she noticed first. It wasn't that it was unpleasant, it was just very different from anything she'd ever known, the kind of odour that hit the back of the throat and could be tasted. She was shocked that it was so pungent even though they hadn't docked, and she wondered if the whole of India smelt the same. She thought about her mum, dad, and Elsie, and Alfie and Tommy, and the complaints of the stink of tripe and cabbage that always seemed to permeate the house because it was their constant diet. It was disagreeable she had to admit, but when your belly thinks your throat's been cut you'll eat anything. The whole of Whitechapel seemed to reek of it, it was just something they had got used to. Here was vastly different and Carrie wondered what the smell meant. Was it from what they ate, she wondered...or something else?

As the ship pulled into Bombay harbour, a gently curving seawall, Carrie stood by the ship's rail, a sleeping John in her arms. She looked down at his face, so tranquil and untroubled, and wondered what their new life would hold for them. Soldiers and their wives, missionaries, women who had come to India alone just for the adventure or to look for a husband stood around her. She heard their exclamations of wonder and delight...and trepidation from some. The constant breeze from the Indian Ocean ruffled her hair, lifting it from her shoulders and swirling it around her face. She inhaled as a wave of panic took hold of her making her breath quiver in her chest. The enormity of what was in front of her suddenly dawned on her and she felt small and insignificant. She had arrived in a strange country, thousands of miles away from home and everyone and everything she knew. She wondered what Johan would have made of it, this adventure she was on. Her heart sank when she realised he probably hadn't given her another thought. Had he realised she was no longer at 99 Nightingale Lane, she thought? She doubted it. The way he looked a Lizabet on their wedding day was the way he used to look at her when they were together. Was he so shallow that he could look at any girl like that as long as he was getting what he wanted? Did his parents know what they'd done and forced him to marry Lizabet? Is that why the marriage was arranged so quickly? Johan had told Carrie he loved her. Did he love Lizabet? Had Carrie meant nothing to him at all? She shook her head trying to rid herself of his image which pushed into her mind's eye. Johan was so handsome, a young man with a bright future, the sparkling, educated, cosseted only son of a

very rich man. Why did she ever think he would want someone like her?

A tear rolled down her cheek and dropped onto John's blanket. She wiped her face on her sleeve and sniffed as Arnold pushed his way through the crowd and appeared next to her. He leant on the railing, a cigarette hanging from his lips. He puffed on it then took it from his mouth, twisting his body so he faced her. An arrogant smirk crossed his face.

'What's that for?'

She turned her face towards him. 'What?'

'You. Crying.'

'I'm not crying.'

'No,' he said. 'You'd better not be. Any other girl would give her right arm to be given a chance to travel and see the world. You don't seem to realise what an opportunity I've given you. Dunno why you're bloody-well crying.'

'Yeah, well, I'd give my right arm to be any other girl right now.'

His eyes narrowed, and he bent his body slightly towards her looking round to make sure no one else was listening. 'Get used to it, miss,' he hissed at her. 'You'd better start being the wife I want or I'll make your life hell.' He straightened up and she stared at him. 'You need to model yourself on your friend, Dorothy Tremain. She knows how to behave even if you don't.'

'You don't want me anywhere near her. Make your mind up.'

He glared at her. 'Don't get smart with me, Carrie Dobbs. You know damn well what I mean. Just copy her. I need a woman like Dorothy Tremain to make sure I get on further in my career, not some dowdy housewife who opens her legs for anyone. Try and act like a lady at least.' He dropped the butt of his cigarette on the deck and ground it in. 'Christ, if I'd know what you were like...'

She glared back at him. 'The feeling's mutual, Arnold,' she hissed back. His face darkened and she watched him swallow down his temper. He couldn't do anything to her on the deck because they weren't alone, surrounded by the other passengers. She was safe from him there. He would never risk making a scene in front of the other soldiers and their wives. His mates would never let him forget it. 'I'll never forgive my mother for landing me with you. You're meant to be my husband, but you're no husband to me. When you start treating me and John right I'll be the way you want. I'll cook and I'll clean and I'll smile at your superiors and your friends. But that's it. And for your information, your ladylove Dorothy Tremain doesn't think much of you.'

His eyes widened and his face coloured up. 'Wha...what d'yer mean?'

'Look at me, Arnold. You say you want me to be like the others. Do I look like the others? Well, don't bother to answer, I'll answer for you. No, I do not, because you won't put your tight-fisted hand in your pocket to make sure I do. How am I supposed to compete with them when I look like a housemaid?'

'You were a housemaid,' he said grudgingly.

'Yes, I was, and I'm not ashamed of it. I worked my arse off at Nightingale Lane.'

He turned his head right and left to make sure no one heard her. 'D'you have to? Keep your voice down,' he whispered. 'Real ladies don't swear.'

'Why? I know what I am, and thanks to you so do they because you've made sure of it. Make you feel big did it, letting them know my baby wasn't yours?'

'I told you, I didn't tell them.'

'No, but you didn't stop them thinking it, did you? Or saying it. You and your so-called friends must have had a right laugh about it. So that's something else I've got to deal with when we get to wherever we're going. Not very bright, Arnold. They're already looking down their noses at me and that's down to you. Some of them won't even look at me, and they've completely ignored John. Do you have any idea how that feels?' He turned sulkily away and observed the colourful mayhem on the harbour. 'That's it, you ignore us too. You'd better hope I don't get my hands on any money when we're in Secunderabad because I'll be hightailing it back home to the people who love me.'

He spat out a laugh. 'Love you? They don't love you. They sold you, my girl, to the highest bidder. That's how much they love you.'

She swallowed hard and looked at him with such contempt it shook him to his core. After a few moments she spoke. 'You have no idea how much I hate you, Arnold Bateman. And I'm not your girl, and I never will be.'

She walked away from him, her head held high, and found a spot at the railings where she could see what was happening on the harbour side. She wanted to cry, but she knew if she let Arnold reduce her to tears there was no hope for her. She had to be strong, stronger than she'd ever been in her life. Standing around her were the people who would become part of her existence for the foreseeable future, including Arnold, and she dreaded it. Arnold was right about one thing; she was nothing like them. Being on board ship with the people who would be in her life had given her a clue as to the kind of society she would be part of. It was like an exclusive club, one to which she had yet to be given entry. Their lives were alien to her, with their constant partying and merrymaking, but she would have to find a way

to be a part of the life she had been thrown in to if only for John's sake. For him she would do anything.

The ship moved in closer to the dock and the people at the harbour wall were bewildering to the astonished onlookers from the ship's decks. There were men, brown-skinned, some swarthy, dressed in loose linen tunics and baggy trousers tapered at the ankles, unloading boxes and crates from the hold. Some of them had lengths of brightly coloured fabric wound around their heads, and all were shouting in loud voices in strange languages with up and down singsong tones that carried on the breeze towards the ship. There were animals left to their own devices, milling about between the groups of men who didn't seem to notice their presence. Behind them, among the melee of people going about their business, were carts drawn by bullocks and horses drawing carriages of Europeans who had already made their home in the bustling city. A pier stretched out from the harbour into the shallows. Strolling along the pier or clustered in gossiping groups were women, young and old, dressed in saris in acidic colours of pink, green, orange, and yellow. Many of the saris were highly decorated with silver and gold thread that sparkled in the afternoon sun. The women were promenading, showing off their beautiful saris to their peers, the younger girls carefree and giggling in groups, unaware they were part of a mystifying tableau so very unfamiliar to the observers on the ship. Carrie was entranced, mesmerised by the dance that played out in front of her. She looked down at her plain dark-green cotton dress buttoned to the neck in a high ruffle and envied these women their freedom to wear such flowing garments in the jewelled colours of the rainbow. This is one of the first things I'll change, she thought. If I'm to become part of the society I've been thrown into against my choice I need to look like the women who inhabit it. Arnold Bateman will have to spend a bit more money on his investment and at the very least be a supportive stepfather of John too, even if he can't find it within himself to love him. She didn't feel guilty about it. He was aware of my situation, she assured herself. So, he needs to accept it and allow me to be the person I know I can be.

'What do you think?' Dorothy stood beside her, the feather in her straw hat flickering in the breeze. She looked down at Carrie, a head shorter than Dorothy.

'It's overwhelming,' Carrie replied. 'I wasn't expecting anything like this.'

'Wait until you get into Bombay. It couldn't be more different from what we have become accustomed to in England.'

Carrie glanced up at her. You have no idea of what I'm accustomed to, she thought. The life you live is likely as different to me as the one I'll encounter in India. 'Do you know Bombay?' she asked Dorothy.

‘Oh, yes,’ Dorothy nodded. ‘Very well. My parents came here twenty years ago, in 1895. I was such a little thing then, but when I reached seven I was sent back to England to go to school. My mother joined me a few years later.’

Carrie was wide-eyed. ‘Where did you live? In England, I mean?’

Dorothy laughed. ‘At my school, of course.’

‘You lived at your school?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Without your parents?’

Dorothy momentarily closed her eyes and bent her head, then looked kindly at Carrie. ‘It’s how things are for us, Carrie. I expect you lived with your parents until recently, am I correct?’ Carrie nodded. ‘We have a different way of going on. I missed my parents dreadfully and I wasn’t very happy at my boarding school, but I had to accept that my father’s work took him to different continents and that I could not be with them. I know my mother missed me, and my sister, Leonora, but we just had to accept. It’s what we women do, isn’t it? Accept our fate.’



THE SOUND OF VARIOUS Indian languages and strains of music reached the newcomer’s ears as they disembarked from The City of London. Flocks of unfamiliar birds flew overhead, many diving into the swelling sea around the ship looking for food. Carrie, with John safely in her arms, and Arnold, made their way through the crowd of disembarking passengers to a bullock cart waiting to take them to a hotel.

‘We’ll spend the night in Bombay then get the train to Sunderabad tomorrow morning.’

‘Where will we stay?’ Carrie asked.

‘In a hotel. And don’t expect the Ritz. This is coming out of my army pay.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Why would I expect the Ritz?’ He glanced down at her without lowering his head, his mouth a straight line, and placing his hand firmly against her back pushed her in the direction of a cart. Before she stepped up to get in she attempted to give John to Arnold to hold, but he stepped back. She shook her head in frustration. ‘Well, how am I supposed to climb in, Arnold? I’ve only got one pair of hands.’ He looked around cautiously before reluctantly stepping forward and taking the baby from her arms. Carrie climbed into the cart and seated herself on the wooden bench, then glanced back at Arnold who was trying to hold John as far away from his body as he could. She sighed and reached out for John, who Arnold thrust

towards her with relief then climbed in behind her.

As they drove through the streets of Bombay Carrie was fascinated and appalled in equal measure. There were crowds of people at every corner and down every alleyway. Market stalls littered the paths and spilled out onto the roads, peddlers selling everything from strange fruits and vegetables to lengths of sari fabric hanging from the fronts of the shops, swaying in the breeze sweeping in from the ocean. Oxen roamed the streets, untethered and it seemed without owners, until someone rounded them up with the switch of a stick and moved them down the street. Women stood in groups, gossiping and arguing with each other with no thought to the myriad people around them or who might be listening to their conversations. The noise was deafening.

The streets the bullock cart took them down were narrow and they were continually brought to a halt as they waited for people to get out of the way. The houses were like nothing Carrie had ever seen before; tall and narrow and painted in all colours. Down the alleyways the buildings were thrown together shacks, some painted as brightly as the saris the women wore, yet the cheerful colours couldn't hide the primitiveness of the buildings or how inefficient they were as family homes. Men, women and children sat outside the structures, preparing food, eating and meeting their neighbours. Countless people milled about as if they all had somewhere very important to go yet didn't actually get anywhere. Beside almost every building sat beggars; mostly men who lay against the walls, half-dressed, many wore only loincloths, some women, and even children who ran beside the bullock cart with their palms raised up to the travellers, grinning and looking for coins.

'Ignore them,' said Arnold. 'If you give to one they'll all come running, even those pretending they can't walk. We're not a soft touch, not for anyone.'

'How much further?' Carrie asked. The heat and noise was wearying her and her clothes were sticking uncomfortably to her body. She looked down at John in her arms who seemed to suffer no ill effects and had been rocked into a deep slumber by the swaying of the cart.

The bullock cart pulled up in front of a large shabby building painted ochre yellow and fronted by large double wrought-iron gates, the entryway to a large courtyard punctuated by straggly unkempt bushes.

'We're here,' said Arnold climbing out of the cart and running to the front to retrieve their luggage. Carrie waited for him to offer to hold John while she clambered off the cart but he didn't and she knew he'd not done so on purpose. She scowled at his back and struggled out of the cart, landing awkwardly on the dusty street. She smoothed

down her skirt and raised her face to view the building.

It was set back from the street, the forecourt untidy with weeds growing up in between broken flagstones. Three stories high, each floor had a veranda edged with an intricately carved railing. The windows were shuttered against a veil of dust hanging in the air from the carts and horses going by on the dusty road outside. The front entrance was two doors, one of which was open and lead into a porch with a closed screen. The ambiance was of genteel shabbiness, a building which had seen better days and was once, in its heyday, very beautiful but had been left unmaintained, ravaged by dust, countless monsoons and the decay of years of neglect. Carrie considered it beautiful. Arnold observed it with a critical eye.

‘Not much but it’ll have to do. It’s only for tonight. Tomorrow night we’ll sleep on the train.’

‘How many nights, exactly?’ she asked him.

‘Four. It’ll take us four and a half days to get to Secunderabad. We’ve got a sleeper berth so think yourself lucky. Some of the women will have to sleep in the carriages.’ He took their luggage across the courtyard and slid it into the porch, then knocked on the dividing screen. Carrie stood behind him waiting with apprehension. A man dressed in a brown brocade frock coat and white turban opened the screen and bowed to them. Arnold picked up the bags and went through into a large hall decorated in red and gold. The man smiled at them and welcomed them into the cool hall. Carrie was relieved to get out of the piercing sunlight and away from the constant noise from the streets. All that could be heard was the breeze rustling through the banyan trees lining the courtyard and the squawking of parrots flying overhead. When the door was closed again it was as if the street outside didn’t exist.

‘I’m Sergeant-Major Bateman,’ said Arnold. ‘I arranged a room for myself and my wife.’

‘Yes, sir. We have been expecting you. I am Basu, manager of the Sundar Ghar Hotel. Please, let me show you to your room.’ He took them up a flight of wooden stairs to the first floor and opened the door to a large room with long windows dressed with muslin drapes. Outside Carrie could see a veranda on which there was a bamboo table and two chairs. The walls of the room were washed in a watery yellow, and on the washed-out floorboards were rush mats. Above the bed was a muslin canopy that draped at the head of the bed. Basu swept his hand towards it. ‘To protect you from mosquito, sir.’ Arnold nodded as Carrie looked around the room.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. ‘There’s no cot. I need a cot for my baby.’

Basu looked dejected. ‘I’m so sorry, madam. I did not know. There was no mention of a baby. I will get one of the boys to bring a cot. I’m

so sorry, madam.'

Carrie smiled at him. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'He wasn't supposed to be here yet. You weren't to know.'

'You will need some refreshment, sir and madam. Please come to the dining room when you have become rested. There will be refreshment for you there.'

Carrie smiled at him again. 'Thank you,' she said. 'That will be lovely.'

When Basu left, Carrie lay John on the bed and pulled the blankets from around him. She removed his clothing and let him lay in his nappy. His skin was hot and clammy to the touch. She poured some water from a floral jug on the dresser into a small bowl and bathed him until he was cool.

'There you are, my little lad,' she cooed to him. 'That's better, isn't it? You were so hot.'

Arnold opened the door to a knock and two Indian boys stood on the veranda, one holding the cases, the other the makings of a cot. The first boy set the cases down by the window and then proceeded to assist the second to set up a cradle which they put by the side of the bed. When they had finished they waited for Arnold to slip them a coin but he didn't and they left.

'Shouldn't we have given them a little something? They probably don't get much,' she said to him.

He frowned as he slipped off his jacket and poured water from the jug into another bowl and began to wash. 'Why should I? They get paid, don't they?' He opened the smaller case and took his shaving equipment from a side-pocket and lined it up on the dresser. 'And while we're on the subject don't go getting close with the natives. The others in the regiment won't like it, and you'd better remember it when we get to Secunderabad as well. We'll have Indians working for us. They'll be servants not friends so make sure you don't get too friendly.'

She nodded and sighed. 'Is there anyone I can be friendly with, Arnold? I'm not allowed to talk to Dorothy Tremaine, and now I can't talk to Indians whose country we'll be living in. Is there anyone else you'd like me to stay away from?'

He snorted a laugh. 'Yeah. Me.'



Chapter 12

Basu had left them a pot of tea and some honey cakes in the dining room. By this time the hotel had begun to fill with soldiers and their wives, and Europeans from other ships. Two of the missionaries, a man and a woman who had travelled with Carrie and Arnold from England, were seated at one of the tables. They had to be contented with their own company as no one else seemed to notice them. When Carrie saw them she nodded and smiled and they returned it. Arnold glared at her but she turned away. He suddenly left their table and went to speak to some of the soldiers from his regiment. They all seemed to be young single men; there were no wives with them, and they were deferring to him. She realised that they were of a lower rank, something she was sure Arnold would relish because of the power it gave him, and when he came back to their table he was flushed with his own importance and belief in his superior status.

‘I wonder if Dorothy and Captain Tremaine are staying here.’

Arnold spluttered into his tea. ‘You do say the most ridiculous things. Of course, they’re not staying here. This hotel is for the riffraff, not people of class like Dorothy Tremaine. They’re likely staying at the Taj Mahal Palace.’

Carrie’s lips twisted into a small smile. ‘Are we riff-raff, then?’

‘Not for too much longer, I hope. When we get to Secunderabad I want to make sure I get to the top of the tree. But we won’t be doing that if you go around smiling at Indians and missionaries.’

‘They’re just people, Arnold. Like you and me.’

‘They are not like me. They’re nothing like me. When I return to England I want to go back as a non-commissioned officer, a captain, with everything that goes with it, including the social standing. It’s why I’ve come to India, to change my life. And this is the best place for me to do it.’

‘And what about me? And John. Where do we come in your plans?’

‘You’ll do as you’re told.’



LATER, AFTER AN AFTERNOON nap which seemed a necessity to get away from the intense heat, Arnold announced he would be meeting his friends after dinner.

‘You’ll want to stay here with him, won’t you?’ he said pointing his thumb at John. ‘And you don’t have a baby carriage so you won’t be

going very far.'

Carrie frowned. 'I wanted to take John to be examined at a hospital. And then, I thought it might be nice to have a look around, you know at the town. I haven't come all this way to be stuck in a room.'

Arnold shrugged. 'I've already told the lads I'll be meeting them later.' He glanced at the baby. 'He's alright, isn't he? Didn't that nurse get someone to look at him for you?'

'Yes, but he wasn't a baby doctor. He was a soldier. He came to India to take care of soldiers, not babies.'

'Still a doctor. And I was there when he examined him. He said he was okay and that's good enough for me.'

Carrie knew there was no arguing with him. 'The soldiers you're going into Bombay with. They're the ones you were talking to earlier? The ones without wives. You have a wife. Should you not put us first? Why aren't you socialising with the soldiers who have brought their families with them.'

Arnold stood in front of the mirror fastening a tie at the neck of his military shirt. 'Oh, don't you worry about that. I will when it counts. When we get to Secunderabad I'll make everyone think I'm the most considerate husband at the station with a wife who will always be grateful for what I'm doing for her. Here...here I shall do as I please.' He turned from his grinning reflection and stared at her. 'I'm not stopping you if you want to go out and explore the town. I'd be careful though. There are all sorts in the streets of Bombay, and they'll want whatever you've got and probably won't ask before they take it. It's up to you, though.'

After dinner Arnold left Carrie standing in the hall and left the hotel with the other soldiers in his regiment. She watched him as he left by the front entrance, allowing the porch screen to swing back with a clang that felt like a slap in the face for her. A wave of anger made her skin prickle, quickly replaced by an overwhelming sadness. She remembered the conversations she and Pearl had had in their little attic room, the ones that went long into the night when they talked about the kind of man they hoped to marry. Never in her wildest dreams did Carrie ever imagine she would end up in a foreign country where she knew no one, with a man who treated her with such utter contempt. The man who called himself her husband. The one she could never love.

She climbed the stairs to the first-floor veranda and let herself into their room, looking around the four walls and wondering what she could do to fill the time that stretched out in front of her. She was not sorry to see Arnold go, but she itched to see what was on the other side of the gates shielding the hotel from the outside world. She

thought about writing home to her parents and to Pearl, but wondered if her letters would ever get to them. Thinking about home made her desolate. It had been a hard life, but it was the one she knew well and there had been a kind of safety in it. Here, she felt as though she was abandoned, a woman with no one in the world to care for her. She had no one in her corner and there was no one else who felt like she did. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she stood by the door. She didn't want to cry because crying meant Arnold had won; had hurt her so much she couldn't recover, so she wiped her eyes on her sleeve and went across to the cot.

John was such a good baby. She could almost tell the time by him; he woke for his feeds like clockwork and the love she had for him was overwhelming. He had not whined at the heat and as long as he was near her he was contented. She adored him already, and in her heart she knew he would be her little friend. He was the one who would make everything she was going through worthwhile.

A gentle rapping on the door startled her. She remembered what Arnold had said about Bombay being a dangerous place and wondered if she should answer it.

'Madam. Madam. It's Basu, the manager.' Basu's voice came from the other side of the door and she ran to open it.

'Basu?'

He bowed, his hands pressed together as if in prayer. 'Madam, I saw you have no carriage for the child. I have one here for you. You can go out into Bombay like the other wives. They have all gone to see the sights. You should go too.'

He stepped to the side and pulled an old pram into the room. It had a rattan body and leather hood. The handle was worn with use and the gilding, a kind of gold paint, was flaking off where other hands had wrapped around it and pushed the carriage to who knew where. Inside the body of the carriage were beautifully embroidered pristine coverlets and an embroidered linen pillow. Basu grinned from ear to ear, so pleased that he could help the young madam from England.

'Oh, Basu, that's so kind. Thank you so much. And the linen is so pretty.'

Basu nodded and looked proud. 'My wife, Mrs Basu sewed them.'

'Please thank Mrs Basu for me. She's very clever. It's beautiful.' She smiled gently, feeling slightly embarrassed in front of Basu because Arnold had clearly abandoned her. 'My husband has gone into Bombay town. I could not go with him because of the baby.'

'Yes, Madam. I saw him leave with his friends. I thought you would like to go and see Bombay for yourself.'

She nodded and bit her lip. 'My husband says it's dangerous for a

woman on her own, Basu. Should I not go?’

‘If you stay on the main street you will be safe. Do not go down the narrow streets to the shacks where the peddlers are. They will no doubt approach you, even an English woman. On the main street there will be many people, men, women, and children. Do not pay the beggars. If you pay one you will pay all and they will not leave you alone.’ She nodded. ‘Be brave, Madam. There is so much to see.’

She grinned and nodded. ‘I will. And thank you for your help. This is lovely.’ She indicated the pram. When he’d left she raised her eyebrows and inspected the pram. ‘Oh, John, this is an old one, but, it’s better than nothing. I think we should go out. Everyone else seems be exploring.’

She changed her dress for a light floral cotton one that had belonged to Elsie. Carrie had altered it to fit her for after the baby was born. She hadn’t known she would wear it so soon. It was a little tight in the bodice, but the limited diet on board the City of London meant she had lost most of the weight she had gained, so she was satisfied with how it looked. She brushed her long brown hair into a chignon and pinned it to the top of her head, then pinched her cheeks to get some colour into them. I’m a wife and mother now, she thought to herself. I need to look the part.

She lifted John from his cot and laid him in the pram. She’d fed him before dinner, so she knew she had a couple of hours before his next feed. Wheeling him out of the room her spirits lifted, and she found herself looking forward to going outside. She walked along the veranda, then realised she would have to get the pram down the wooden staircase. Basu and one of his boys were waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

‘We are here, Madam, to help you.’ They ran up the stairs and lifted the baby carriage, taking it down into the hall. Carrie nodded and thanked them. ‘I’m so sorry. I have nothing to give you, but I promise I will get something for you for tomorrow.’

Basu shook his head. ‘No, no, Madam, please, do not worry. We are pleased to help.’



THE EARLY EVENING SUN was still intense, and she pulled up the baby carriage hood and folded the coverlet away from John to keep him cool. The hood provided plenty of shade for the baby and he looked comfortable and contented. This was the first time she had wheeled him in a pram and she enjoyed the feeling of having him in front of her. It meant she could see him all the time, and she found herself smiling and enjoying the walk through the streets. As she

walked past the hotels and the tall houses the noise from the main street got louder and louder, and the smells of spices and garlic and street-food cooking on dozens of braziers lining the street was even stronger. Even though she had eaten the aroma made her mouth water and she was surprised that the smell of food so foreign to her would have this effect. For dinner, the hotel had given them their idea of English food; pale meat, watery carrots, and hard potatoes. The food on the outdoor cooking stoves was bright and colourful, and Indians and Europeans stood in a group around each one, waiting for their share. Music came from many of the stores, strange lilting sounds that made no sense at all to Carrie, and certainly no tune she recognised. The marketplace sold everything, beautiful bright exotic flowers, pots and pans, fruit and vegetables in mounds on the street where shoppers inspected them before buying, and stalls where men made leather bags and belts or jewellery from precious metals and stone.

Behind all of this excitement and socialising were the native quarters, ramshackle dwellings crowded into tightly inhabited streets and occupied by families living in squalor. The shacks were painted in gaudy colours like their fashionable European looking counterparts in the centre, but that was where any comparison ended. Carrie thought about the house where she and her family lived in Hanbury Street, and how much they complained about having to use an outside privy they shared with the neighbours either side of them. Nothing would ever prepare the residents of Whitechapel for the scenes of mayhem down the alleys of Bombay.

Carrie wandered on, finding it more and more difficult to dodge the people who seemed quite happy to bump into anyone they encountered rather than finding a way around them. The baby carriage was knocked a few times and she decided to turn around and go back the way she came. It would soon be time for John's feed and she wanted to be safely back at the Sundar Ghar Hotel in good time. She negotiated the heaving crowd and was about to turn the pram to face the opposite direction when someone grabbed her arm.

'What're you doing here?'

She turned quickly in the direction of the voice to see Arnold standing next to her, a cigarette balanced precariously on his bottom lip. She frowned, worried it would fall into John's pram.

'What does it look like?' she said, pulling her arm away from his fingers digging into her flesh.

'I told you to stay in the hotel,' he said in a low voice.

'No, you didn't. You said I wouldn't be able to go out because I didn't have a pram. Well, someone got one for me. And no, I didn't ask them to. Basu brought it to the room because he knew I didn't have one. At least someone cares about me and John. Anyway, what

difference does it make? I wasn't bothering you, and I'm going back now to give John his feed.' She looked past him and saw a young soldier standing by one of the street-food vendors. He kept glancing in their direction then looking away again. 'You with him?'

'We were about to go to one of the bars.'

'So, go then. I'm not stopping you.' She pushed past him and walked back down the street, dodging the bicycles, the oxen, the stray dogs and the myriad people, all squeezed into the narrow street. Then she thought of something and turned back. 'I need some money.'

Arnold frowned. 'For what?'

'I need a hat. All the other wives have one because of the heat.'

He fished about in his pocket and took out a note. 'Here's two and a half Rupees. That should be enough.'

'Doesn't seem much.'

'It'll be enough,' he said, and went to join his companion, who looked slightly embarrassed, then laughed loudly at something Arnold said to him. Carrie frowned, wondering why Arnold had made such a seemingly close friend of someone who was a lower rank in his regiment, but she shrugged thinking she didn't really know how everything worked. No doubt I'll learn soon enough, she thought as she began the return journey to the hotel. John had begun to stir, so she quickly made her way to a peddler selling hats and brought a round straw with a small posy of flowers on the brim, leaving her two Rupees. 'I'll give a Rupee to Basu,' she said to a now squirming John looking for his feed, 'and keep one for us just in case. We might need it.'



Chapter 13

The Victoria Terminus in Bombay was built along land on the Eastern shore known as the Bori Bandar. The vastness of the building with its octagonal dome topped by a huge figure of a woman took Carrie's breath away, and even Arnold seemed suitably impressed.

'I wasn't expecting this,' he said, a whistle of surprise leaving his lips. 'What the hell is this about?'

'It's beautiful,' whispered Carrie.

'It's Victorian Gothic,' a voice said behind them. 'Classical Indian with Italian influences.' Carrie turned quickly and found herself staring into the eyes of a soldier. Arnold stood swiftly to attention and saluted. 'Captain Lawrence, sir,' he said.

Captain Lawrence lit a cigarette, cupping his hand around the sizzling match. The flare highlighted the smooth contours of his face, and as he shook the match out he smiled at Arnold. 'Stand easy, Arnold. Time for all that when we get to the cantonment at Secunderabad.' He glanced over to Carrie. 'I take it this is your new wife. I'd heard you'd done the deed during your leave. Thought I'd never see the day. Please, introduce us.'

'Er, yes, sir. This is Caroline Violet Dobbs, my...my wife, er, known as Carrie. Carrie this is Captain Lawrence.' He cleared his throat. 'My boss.'

Lawrence frowned. 'Dobbs? Bateman, surely.'

Arnold looked flustered and Carrie couldn't help smiling to herself at Arnold's obvious awkwardness at having to admit she was his wife, and his mistake. 'Yes...yes, of course, sir. Carrie Bateman.' Lawrence held his hand out to Carrie. She gawped at it. No one had ever wanted to shake her hand before. She glanced up to find his dark brown eyes observing her and she felt her face burn. She took his hand, relieved she was wearing gloves, and bobbed a curtsy.

He grinned. 'And there's no need for that either, Mrs. Bateman. Your husband is a Sergeant-Major. You certainly don't need to curtsy to anyone.' He turned to Arnold. 'I'll see you when we get to the station, Sergeant Major Bateman. I hear there's a discipline problem amongst the men at the cantonment. Think they've had it a bit too easy. You'll deal with it, I'm sure.'

Arnold nodded and saluted again. 'Yes, sir, I'd heard the same. Don't worry, sir, I'll sort it out.'

Lawrence nodded. 'I know I can rely on you.' He turned his attention to Carrie. 'It was very good to meet you at last, Mrs.

Bateman. I hope we can rely on you to be part of the society in Secunderabad. We're a territorial little lot and we'll need some pleasant entertainment. I'm sure Bateman here has explained it all to you.' He smiled at her and she nodded, not really understanding what he meant. He nodded and tipped his cap, then walked towards the station. Arnold grabbed her arm. 'We need to get moving. The train will be here soon, and if we miss it there'll be hell to pay.'

She nodded saying nothing, and pushed the pram towards the vast gothic entrance of the station crowned by figures of a lion and tiger. The hall was a complete contrast to the dusty outside; cool, with vast high ceilings, and echoing with a hundred voices.

'We need to find the booking office,' said Arnold, his need to get moving making his voice gruff and his patience thin. 'There it is, the Star Chamber. Come on, we need to get our tickets before everyone else has the same idea. I hate queuing.'

Carrie looked around at the stone arches carved with grotesque faces and foliage. The ceiling was a deep blue with gold stars. She sighed with wonder, entranced by everything around her.

'I've never seen anything like this before,' she said. 'It's like being in another world. Is Secunderabad like this?'

Arnold shook his head. 'No, nothing like this. It's all very utilitarian, but much better than where we've come from. And you heard what Captain Lawrence said. There will be expectations and you'll need to make sure you meet them.' She put her head down and didn't answer him. He frowned, looking cross. 'Now what's the matter with you?' He puffed out an exasperated sigh. 'It's not too much to ask, is it? It's what I paid for after all. I think you're getting a bloody good deal.'

'I don't want a deal, Arnold. You make it sound like a business transaction.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Well, that's what it is. I've paid and you have to deliver. Christ, all you've got to do is be nice to people, serve drinks and smile. Even you can do that.' She closed her eyes and waited for him to pay for the tickets. She opened her eyes and watched him remonstrating with the ticket clerk about the price and her heart sank.

She wondered about how it would be in Secunderabad, the place that would become her home for the foreseeable future. Pearl had said it was an adventure, but Carrie knew she'd only said it to keep her spirits up when she was frightened of what she had in front of her. If only Pearl had been there with her she'd know what to do. She was so much more streetwise than Carrie, and Pearl gave her a confidence she didn't feel when she was on her own. I've never missed you as much as I do now, Pearl, she thought. I thought I couldn't feel worse

than I did when I was on the ship, but I'm thousands of miles away from you and I need you so much. She looked at John asleep in the pram.

'It won't be forever, sweetheart,' she whispered. 'I'll get away from Arnold Bateman as soon as I can, and we'll go home to where we belong to the streets of Whitechapel, a place I love. Just you and me, my darling. Just you and me.'



99 Nightingale Lane

Part 2



Chapter 1 4

The four-day journey by rail to Secunderabad Station was arduous, sweaty and arid, and Carrie felt every one of the four hundred and forty miles from Bombay to Secunderabad jangle and jolt through her bones. The carriages rattled across the Indian terrain with, it seemed, no concern for passenger comfort, and Carrie wondered if they would ever get to their destination. The juddering and shaking from side to side didn't bother John, in fact the rolling movement of the train sent him to sleep, which Carrie was grateful for. After a while Carrie felt a malady in her stomach, something akin to seasickness. The food offered to the travellers on board did nothing to quieten her insides; there was an abundance of curried meat, mutton chops, kidneys and chicken, the bones of old fowls made into a questionable soup, and not much else apart from rice which accompanied every meal. Sometimes when the train came to a halt, men dressed in calf-length cotton trousers and turbans would run up to the windows of the carriage, offering fruit and water which Carrie had been advised not to buy, as tempting as it was. She'd been told by a steward the food offered could be days old and kept in unsanitary conditions. She decided with regret to follow his advice.

The compartment in which she and the other wives were seated was allocated only to Europeans; Indian natives travelled on another part of the train, so Carrie was thrown together with those she had come into contact with on board ship, the girls she had done her best to avoid. This is worse than ever, she thought, they in their little groups of chattering girls, probably gossiping about some poor unsuspecting person, and me trying to stay away from them. Is this how it will be in Secunderabad? She was grateful that Arnold had secured them a small private berth which meant she could disappear with John if the need arose, pretending he needed to be fed or changed. It was the kindest thing Arnold had done for them, although she was quite certain he hadn't done it for her and her son's benefit, rather that he like to think of himself as officer material and didn't want to sit with the ordinary soldiers. She felt guilty using her son as an excuse to get away from the stares of derision or the silences that fell on the company when she appeared in the carriage and sat on one of the banquets, but it was the only solution to the problem she had had to face on the ship where it was so vast she could get away and be on her own, and certainly it wasn't a situation that Arnold helped to alleviate. She knew to complain to him about the way the women

were treating her would be to risk his contempt for her even further and no benefit would be gained from it.

She wondered at the feelings of Indians towards those Europeans who had come from thousands of miles away to rule their country. She knew why the British military was sent to India. Arnold had given her chapter and verse one night when he'd drunk a bottle of brandy and was so drunk he could hardly stand. He had rambled about the mutiny in 1857 that had started in Meerut, resulting in the murder of so many innocents, women and children included which had sounded so frightening and abhorrent to Carrie and she hoped with all her heart it could never happen again, but it seemed that at the station in Bombay Europeans had simply appeared from nowhere, had spilled off the ships and the connecting trains and taken the most comfortably furnished carriages, pushing past Indians who had been waiting for the train, seemingly for hours. Many of them had camped on the platforms, rolled out bedding, cooked food for their many children on tiny stoves, and washed and dressed in front of each other, something utterly alien to her as someone who had only ever undressed in front of Pearl in their tiny room in Nightingale Lane. It felt very wrong that Europeans imagined they were better than the people who were born in India, their own country. Why are they not here too, she thought as she looked around the carriage with the ruby red velvet banquettes and shutters on the windows? This is their country after all, where they were born and raised.

Many of the women Carrie sought to escape talked openly about their relief at not being introduced to 'the natives' at this early stage, and realised that most of them considered Indians to be inferior in the social standing, looked upon only as "good enough" for servants and care givers. She would turn away and gaze out of the window. Having come from what she knew they would consider to be a lowly background she had plenty to say on the subject, but knew neither they, nor Arnold, would appreciate her opinion.

Secunderabad lies in the southern part of India towards the Eastern terrain where the summers are incredibly hot and the monsoons come from late June, providing the landscape with a lush, rich setting Carrie had not expected. She was astonished at the countryside; green palm trees and parcels of arable land used for growing vegetables and rice stretched as far as the eye could see. Some of the fields were on the hillsides or situated on terraces, and on the flatlands there were oxen and water buffalo; animals working alongside the men and women in the fields. And it was very hot, hotter than anything she had ever experienced. Sometimes in the kitchen at Nightingale Lane she wondered how cook coped with the overwhelming heat from two ovens and simmering pans on a hob which was always alight during

daylight hours. Even with the windows open in the carriages and the air blowing through on both sides it provided no respite from the intense heat. The incoming air was so warm it simply made the passengers even hotter.

Carrie sat quietly in a carriage that was relatively empty. Many of the other women had kept to their berths because of the unbearable heat, and she took the opportunity to leave the suffocating four walls of their tiny compartment and enjoy some time on her own. John was fast asleep in his cot and she knew he would be safe in the locked compartment.

She listened to the noise the carriages made as they went over the bumpy track. There was a kind of rhythm to the chug, chug, noise and it was quite comforting to her, even though it was accompanied by lots of lurching and shaking. She took the opportunity to look around the carriage. Some of the other travellers had remained inside the carriage, happy to take on the heat and the company of others. She recognised the missionaries who had been on *The City of London*. They were sitting closely together without speaking, both staring out of the window. The woman must have felt Carrie's eyes on her because she looked up and gave her a watery smile. Carrie nodded and returned it. She knows how I feel, she thought. Missionaries are second-class citizens as far as the other women are concerned, but at least she has her husband on her side. Others were keeping themselves to themselves, their noses deep in a book so they didn't have to converse with anyone else, or doing complicated embroidery, their heads down as if to say, "Please don't speak to me".

A loud peel of high-pitched laughter rang out from the back of the carriage. Carrie leant across the long banquet seat and peered down the aisle where a group of young women were playing cards. This was the "fishing fleet" she'd heard so much about when she'd wandered up to the top deck of *The City of London*, the educated young women who had been sent to India by their parents who had paid handsomely for their passage so they could find a husband amongst the officers stationed at the cantonments. Madness, she thought. I hope they don't end up with someone like Arnold. She sighed and looked out of the window. He had given her no reason to think he would suddenly become the husband to her he should have been, apart from when it was required of him. For show, she thought, when one of his unit was close, or one of his seniors, and only to make them think he was a man with a family, a "family man" who was taking care of her and John. If only they knew, she thought. If only they knew.

A rustle on the seat next to her brought her out of her daydream and she turned to find Dorothy staring at her.

'Penny for you thoughts, Carrie,' she said, smiling. 'You were miles

away.'

Carrie shrugged. 'Was I?'

'Was it a nice place, wherever you were?'

'No, not really.'

Dorothy inhaled deeply. 'I'm guessing your thoughts were in the familiar streets of London where you live and not in the unknown alleys of Secunderabad.'

'Something like that.' She looked out the window again, wishing Dorothy would go back to her friends. She glanced nervously at the glass in the door separating their carriage from the dining car. She knew Arnold had been in there with his friends and she prayed he wouldn't choose this moment to suddenly return. If he saw her speaking to Dorothy he would be less than happy. She began to rise from her seat. 'Well, I think I'll...'

Dorothy put a gloved hand on her arm. 'Just a moment, Carrie, before you run away again.' Carrie lowered her eyes and sat down, wondering what Dorothy had to say to her, wishing she would understand and leave her alone. She raised her face and looked Dorothy directly in the eyes; beautiful, grey and staring at her with benevolence. Her features were soft, almost regretful. 'Is he kind to you?'

Carrie froze. Dorothy had caught her off guard and she hoped her expression wouldn't give her away. 'Kind to me?' She frowned, pretending not to know who Dorothy meant. 'I'm sorry, who do you mean, Dorothy?'

'Bateman? Is he kind to you?'

'Well, he...he, he does what he can.'

'That's not much of an answer.' She moved her hand away from Carrie's arm. 'And yet it tells me everything.'

'My life is very different from yours, Dorothy. I wish you would understand that.'

'You keep saying it, but we're both women and I think most women want the same thing.'

'I say it because it's true. You must know it.' She inhaled to steady herself. 'You married your husband for love, didn't you? And he married you for the same reason.'

Dorothy frowned at her. 'Of course. Why else?'

Carrie sighed and argued with herself about her next words to Dorothy, but her need to let her feelings out got the better of her. 'But that's the point. I hadn't planned to say this to anyone and if Arnold finds out I will be in a good deal of trouble, but you've asked me the question. I like you, Dorothy. We may be completely different and our backgrounds are like chalk and cheese, but you're the only person who has shown me and my baby any kindness since I left London,

apart from the Indian manager at the hotel who I'm sure knew my situation without me telling him. His concern for me was written all over his face. I want to be honest with you. I don't love Arnold, and I can assure you he doesn't love me.'

She looked shocked. 'But you married him.'

'Yes, I did, because I had no choice. I was forced into the marriage by my parents, mostly my mother.'

'Why? Why would they make you marry a man you don't love?'

'Because they were ashamed of me. I brought shame on the family and it was something they couldn't forgive.'

Dorothy's steady gaze observed Carrie for a moment until realisation crossed her face. 'The baby. John isn't Arnold's.'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, he isn't.'

Dorothy looked flustered and Carrie thought it was probably the first time she'd been caught off-guard. 'I'm...I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...' Dorothy breathed in then smiled awkwardly. 'I've embarrassed you. Please forgive me, it wasn't my intention.'

'There's nothing to forgive, Dorothy. I'm not embarrassed. I was silly...naïve my mother said. I believed a man when he told me he loved me. I loved him. Very much. I thought he would stand by me, but I was forbidden to tell him about John.'

'But why? Surely he should know he has a son.'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, I thought so too, but my parents had other ideas. They said because he came from a different class and a different religion he would not stand by me, that John's could be anyone's and he would probably deny it. And Dorothy, they were proved right. He broke my heart because he married someone else without telling me it was going to happen. The wedding must have been planned all the time we were seeing each other.'

'How did you find out?'

Carrie hesitated. She felt that to tell this woman who came from such a privileged background that she was a maid in Johan's home might be a step too far, but she had already gone much further than she had intended. What was the point of keeping it a secret? It was secretiveness that had ruined her life. 'I worked for his parents. In their house. I was a maid.'

Dorothy gasped. 'Did he...take you?'

Carrie laughed. 'No, Dorothy. He didn't take me. I gave myself to him willingly. It wasn't like you think. I honestly loved him. He said he wanted us to be together, that we would make a life together, build a home. I believed him because it's what I wanted to believe. I shamed myself and I shamed my family. They might be poor but they know what pride is. It's all they've got.'

Dorothy shook her head. 'You poor girl.'

Carrie stood and gathered her things together, a book, a little flask of water, and she hoped her dignity. 'So now you know why we cannot be friends. I would imagine you will not want to speak with me again. You will not want to be seen with me. You will not want to share in my disgrace. All I ask is that you do not share what I've told you with your friends. They already despise me. If they find out what happened to me in London my life in Secunderabad won't be worth living. And it won't only be the women. Arnold would never forgive me, and I have to try and make some sort of a life in India. My home seems such a long way away and I'm beginning to think I'll never see it again which breaks my heart.'

'I can assure you Carrie, I will not share what you've told me, not with anyone.'

Carrie nodded her thanks, went back to her and Arnold's tiny compartment, and cried and cried.



DOROTHY WATCHED CARRIE as she left the carriage and stepped into the corridor. She frowned at the girl's back, wondering what she could do to help her, thinking that she had an almost impossible job on her hands. Carrie was right when she said she wasn't like the other girls on the train who would make their lives in Secunderabad. She was not shallow or constantly looking for someone to belittle, only out for grabbing a man and expecting him protect the empire while she did nothing, and Dorothy still harboured a hope that she and Carrie would be friends. The officer's wives were a giggly bunch, constantly looking for someone to gossip about. It seemed to be the only thing they were good at. When one of the girls left the group they would talk about her in the most unflattering terms, ripping to pieces her appearance and the way she spoke, and if any of her relatives were tradespeople it seemed to be a matter for hilarity. When she returned to her seat around the table and someone else left they would gossip about her, the returnee joining in the personal demolition, not thinking for a moment that it was possible that the other girls had been discussing her while she was away. Dorothy had grown tired of it and had made it her business to avoid them as much as was deemed polite. When she had met them on deck they had made a point of trying to include her in their conversations, but she knew it was only because Marcus was a commissioned officer and they wanted their husbands on his shirt tails. There were rules in the society in which they'd been thrown. She knew how it all worked. Unfortunately, poor Carrie did not. She'll have to learn, she thought. She must learn if she is to survive. She's part of the Raj now, no matter what her beginnings

were. The British society in India could be savage. She knew this because of her mother's experiences years before, and Dorothy doubted that things had changed much. The privileges of being part of such a group were great, but they came with a good deal of responsibility. A military wife in the Raj had certain expectations thrust upon her, and she had to rise to them or risk being trampled underfoot. India was a huge shock to everyone when they first arrived, but it was the British Carrie would have to win over. And she needs the tools to know how to do that, thought Dorothy, relaxing back in her seat, smiling to herself. And I'm the woman who has them.



Chapter 15

At the end of the fourth day of their journey, when Carrie believed she really couldn't take another day of dust and mutton chops, the train gradually ground to halt, billowing steam and dust onto the platform at Secunderabad Station like a great metal monster arriving in a cloud of vapour. Arnold was getting into a flap encouraging Carrie to move faster in gathering their things together in the tiny compartment, whilst doing nothing himself apart from barking orders.

'Get a move on, Carrie, for goodness sake. We have to find a cart to take us to the station and if we're the last out we'll never get one.'

She glanced up at him and shook her head with frustration. 'Maybe you could give me a hand, Arnold, instead of flapping around like a chicken with its head lopped off. I'm not one of yer soldiers in the unit, so you can stop ordering me about and help me get our things together. It may have escaped your notice but I have a baby to look after. I've to make John comfortable before we leave and I can't do that and pack our things.'

He ran his hand through his thin hair, making the oily partings even wider. The heat didn't suit Arnold. Not only did he look greasier than he had before, but it also made him tetchy too. 'It's your job. This is your job. It's what you're here for. It's what the wives do, organise everything so their husbands don't have to. Don't you know anything?'

'And as I said, the other wives down have a baby to look after. John needs me at the minute. He needs changing, Arnold. I doubt I'll get a chance later. The carts will just have to wait.' She lowered her voice and mumbled under her breath. 'And so will you for that matter.'

He looked out of the window and sighed. 'Look, look, they're all leaving. We have to get off this bloody train.' He began gathering up the bags, shoving one under his arm and lugging two more by hand. 'I'll meet you outside,' he said. 'Just don't take too long about it or I'll leave you here. I'm off to find some transport. I'm expected to see the unit into Secunderabad, you heard Captain Lawrence when we were at Bombay station, and if I don't do it I'll be for the high jump. Don't keep me waiting.'

She watched his retreating back as he squeezed out of the narrow door and walked down the narrow corridor, bumping into the door frames with their bags. Carrie wiped John's sticky body with a damp cloth and dressed him in a cotton smock. 'Poor baby,' she cooed. 'It's

so hot, darling.' She wrapped him in a cool muslin, lifted him from the bed and placed him gently in the pram that the hotel had kindly donated to her, smoothing her hand across his downy head. 'It'll be alright,' she said softly, more to herself than to the baby. 'Everything will be alright.'

She was startled by a sharp rapping on the window and looked up to see Arnold's sweaty face pressed up against it. His hot breath fogged the glass and she could see his mouth moving.

'Come on, Carrie, for God's sake. We'll get left behind.'

Carrie took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before she released it. She looked down at John in the pram, his tiny legs kicking, and she blinked back tears of remorse. 'I'm so sorry, John. I'll look after you, my darling, don't worry. I have you and you're all I care about.' Her glance settled on the window again where the vapour of Arnold's breath had left a smear. She gathered the bags together Arnold had left for her to carry and left the berth and put them over her arm as she pushed the pram down the corridors which were empty. Carrie could see they were indeed almost the last to leave the train apart from a few stragglers who were not with their party. After stepping awkwardly off the train, and with a helping hand from the Indian ticket inspector to lift the pram, she pushed John along the platform, past the families camping there, their bedding rolled up for another day of waiting, the cooking stoves, the children playing in the dirt, and made her way under an arch that led her to a ticket hall where there were queues in every direction, looking for an exit that would take her outside. Around the perimeter of the ticket hall were stalls selling hot, spicy snacks, sweets and sherbets, fruit stalls with colourful oranges and bananas, figs and dates. Hawkers approached her holding green coconuts, mangoes and glasses of soda, lemonade and raspberryade, bright red and as tempting as a punnet of juicy ripe raspberries. There were jugs of cold water on the ground and urns of milky tea next to them. Carrie would have loved some tea, but she dare not keep Arnold waiting any longer. As she made her way across the hall she could see a huge set of double doors leading to daylight, and waiting outside was a bullock cart with Arnold leaning against it, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, his legs crossed at the ankle. As he bent his head to drop the butt onto the ground, a strand of thin hair fell in front of his face and he bad-temperedly pushed it back then slapped his hand against the cart. Carrie took a deep breath and straightened her back. Behind her a train had just arrived on the platform opposite the one where their train now silently waited to be reloaded, and it occurred to her that she was moments away from getting on that train, regardless of where it was going. Anywhere to take her away from the uncertain life waiting for her and John in the

Secunderabad cantonment. 'But I don't have any money,' she said to herself. 'Arnold's made sure of it, and here in Secunderabad as in London, you can't get anywhere without money.'

'Well, thanks for that,' Arnold said, exasperated and sweaty as she joined him by the bullock cart.

'Thanks for what?' Carrie answered frowning. 'What have I done now?'

He leaned into her, his breath hot on her cheek, his teeth locked together. 'Don't question me, Carrie Dobbs. I told you to hurry, didn't I? I have to be at the barracks before the men in my unit and now they'll have to wait for me thanks to you. You're a pain in the neck.'

Carrie ignored him and placed her bags into the waiting bullock cart then put her foot on the footrest and stepped inside, settling herself on one of the rough wooden seats around the edge. She smoothed down her skirts and waited for Arnold to lift the pram into the cart. She looked at Arnold who was staring at her. 'I thought we were in a hurry.'

He glared at her and narrowed his eyes, then hauled the pram and himself into the cart and went to the front behind the driver, making sure not to sit next her. He turned and tapped the driver hard on the shoulder. 'What are you waiting for, and hurry up about it. We're late.' He turned back and glared at Carrie again. She raised her eyebrows and shook her head, allowing her eyes to wander away from him and settle in the middle distance.

Outside Secunderabad Station there were crowds of people, Indian and European, either rushing towards the station or leaving it. As the driver pulled away from the station Carrie turned her head and looked back at the solid brick building with its archways and porticos that resembled a fort and wondered when the next time would be that she would see the station again. Arnold had assured her the army cantonment in Secunderabad wasn't far from the station, and Carrie believed this information as a sign because she knew to return here meant she would be escaping. It would be the first step of many in her journey home, a place that seemed so very far away from the alien place she now lived, one she would hold in her heart until she saw it again. And she would see it again, of this she was determined.



THE CART BUMPED ACROSS lumpy roads strewn with debris and swerved to miss chickens running in front of them or other bullock carts coming in the opposite direction. There were no rules regarding road etiquette, no lines of embarkation. Carrie realised it was every man for himself. Horses rode swiftly past them, and the odd motor

vehicle left them in the dust, but the atmosphere was quieter less busy and more rural. Bombay had been bursting at the seams, yet even with the occasional burst of activity on the roads Secunderabad appeared more sedate, the pace slower. Carrie was glad. As much as she'd enjoyed exploring the streets of Bombay and marvelled at the diversity of people there she had worried about John growing up in such a community. The streets had felt airless, layered with constant chatter in languages so alien to her, the strong aromas of street food offered to passers-by wherever she looked by vendors trying to scrape a living, mouth-watering if hungry, but its constant presence stomach curling in its overwhelming quantity. There was also a strong evidence of military personnel in the town; many of the bullock carts contained soldiers and their wives and families, a life Carrie knew she would have to get used to and be part of if she were to find her place within its confines.

Arnold lit another cigarette and turned his gaze on her through narrowed eyes as he drew on it. 'I hope you're gonna behave when you get to the cantonment.'

'Behave? How do you want me to behave?'

He turned away. 'Like a lady...if you can manage it.'

She laughed. 'Like you'd know how a lady behaves, Arnold. And will you treat me like one because I've seen no evidence of it so far.'

'When you behave like one you'll be treated like one. Just keep your mouth shut and when you do speak be careful what you say and don't speak out of turn. Let's face it, you know nothing about nothing so no one's going to be interested in anything you have to say. In other words just do as you're told and you'll get along fine.' He blew out a smoke ring. 'And don't go getting all pally with those above you, like Dorothy Tremaine and her friends. You've got nothing in common with them and it's best you stay away from them.'

'Right. So who can I talk to? And what if they talk to me? Am I supposed to ignore them?'

'You just busy yourself. You'll have plenty to do. You won't have time for gossiping, and there's no need to for you to talk to anyone because you haven't got anything to say that they'll want to hear. Am I making myself clear?'

She frowned and looked hard at him. 'What are you scared of, Arnold?'

His eyes flashed and she shrank back against the rough wooden seat. 'I ain't scared of nothing. Don't forget I'm a soldier and I'm the important one here. I'm here to do a job, an important job of protecting our empire, and it's your job to make sure I'm comfortable while I'm doing it. So you keep house and make sure that when we have visitors you don't heap shame on us. Do you understand?'

‘I speak English, the same as you, so yes, I understand.’

‘Good. Just be sure you do what’s expected.’

‘And what’s that?’

Arnold sniffed and looked away. ‘You’ll find out when we get there.’



Chapter 16

Carrie stood silently in the doorway of the bungalow as the late afternoon sunlight dappled the scorched grass under the banyan and custard apple trees on the small lawn in front of the house. She held her straw hat by the rim, absentmindedly turning it round and round in her fingers, feeling the rough straw against her skin as she watched the *punkah*, the member of Arnold's staff who operated the huge fan swathed across the ceiling, pulling on the rope threaded out of one of the windows. Behind her, in the large, vaulted room filled with light and shadows, the walls roughly whitewashed, John lay in his pram kicking his legs, mewling and making sucking noises, his belly ready for another feed. Carrie stared out into the cantonment at the other bungalows where her fellow military wives were busily making their homes, organising their husbands and fussing about how the furniture left behind by another family should be arranged. She squinted her eyes against the whiteness of the bungalow facades and breathed in the pungent smell of orangey-red hibiscus which grew in every garden.

'Carrie.' Arnold's voice interrupted her daydream and she turned as he entered the room from a narrow corridor that separated the living room from the bedrooms. He loosened the top button of his shirt and took off his jacket, flinging it on one of four rattan chairs placed around an oblong coffee table in the centre of the room, then stuck his hands in his pockets. 'Why don't you go and unpack. The bags are in the master bedroom.' He frowned as she stepped further into the room and went across to John, rubbing her hand across his downy head.

'That'll take me all of two minutes, Arnold. Making John comfortable is more important. He's ready for a feed now. I'll take him into the bedroom and feed him before I do anything else.'

'You won't need to worry about looking after him for too much longer. Every child at the cantonment has an *ayah* and he'll be no different.'

She straightened her back and stared at him. 'A what?'

'An *ayah*.'

She shook her head, frowning. 'What's that?'

'You mean, who's that. It's an Indian nanny. She'll take care of the child so you can take care of me. You'll need time to make the right connections here, organise social events so that I'm seen in a good light by the officers. I thought we could have a get-together here tomorrow night to welcome the unit to their new home. I want to be

the first one to send out invitations. The others will be jockeying for position but they'll have to follow me if we get in quick which is what I want. You'll need to sort out the food, drink, that kind of thing...find out what people drink here, something cool and alcoholic I should imagine. Oh, and champagne. The kind of people who'll attend will want champagne and lots of it.'

'But...' Carrie frowned, shaking her head, feeling that everything was drifting out of her control. 'No, Arnold. No one is looking after John but me. He's my baby, my son. I'm his mother. And...and I don't know this person. Who says he's to have a nanny, anyway? No one asked me.'

'I didn't have to ask you. I did what I thought was right, what I know is right. No European woman looks after their own child here. And neither will you. All the children here have an *ayah*, from when they're babies up until the age of seven. Then he'll be sent back to England to go to school, a live-in school where he'll get a decent education and you can be free to do your duty and your job. And he'll have a wet-nurse too, so you can forget all that business,' he said, flicking his hand towards her breasts. 'It's disgusting anyway. We're sophisticated English military, not primitive savages. Why you couldn't use bottles like everyone else is beyond me. And don't look at me like that. You won't be searching for things to do while you're here, my girl. You'll have plenty to occupy your time believe me.'

'I know it didn't mean much to you, Arnold, but I gave birth on board a ship. There were no bottles. What would you have me do, let him starve? And believe you? Why the hell would I believe you?'

Arnold moved swiftly across the floor and snatched the front of Carrie's dress, pulling her towards him, his teeth clenched together in anger. 'Keep your sodding voice down,' he hissed. Carrie leant back, away from his anger and his alcohol laden breath, but then glanced behind him when a woman entered the room to see what the commotion was, her face contorted by concern.

She was as tall as Carrie, skeletally thin, her skin the colour of the spices with which she cooked and her complexion deeply lined. Her hair was pulled off her face and wound into a tight, greying chignon. Her dark brown, almond-shaped eyes quietly observed them with surprise.

'Sahib?' she said softly. Arnold stepped back and put a hand up to reassure her.

'No matter, Gita. Everything is alright.'

She nervously wiped her hands on her apron covering her sari, a rather plain piece of yellow cloth wrapped around her body, nothing like the beautiful jewel-coloured saris Carrie had seen on her arrival in Bombay.

‘Yes, sahib,’ she whispered, her voice barely audible. She left the room as silently as she’d entered it and Arnold’s eyes, full of contempt, roamed Carrie’s face. ‘Have some dignity, my girl,’ he said, keeping his voice low. ‘Don’t you care what people think of you?’

‘Why should I care?’ she answered. ‘I want to be allowed to take care of my son, Arnold. It’s all I want. He’s all I have here, and now you’re telling me you’re taking him away from me too.’

Arnold shook his head and grabbed his jacket from the chair without even a glance at John who, sensing his mother’s distress, was now crying.

‘Don’t be so dramatic. I knew you’d be trouble but I didn’t think you’d be a whiner. Feed him for goodness sake, then do what you want for the rest of the day. It might help if you went to meet the staff. Gita’s the cook. We have a *dhobi wallah* to do the laundry and another *wallah* to do the cleaning. All you have to do is to make sure my household runs smoothly. Even you can do that with your scullery maid experience. I would have thought it would have come very easily to you.’ He turned to leave. ‘Oh, and don’t forget,’ he said, turning back with a smirk on his face. ‘There’s only one person you’ll be opening your legs for, and that’s me. Still, you’ll be used to laying down for the boss, won’t you, so it’ll come easily for you?’ The smirk left his face and his eyes hardened as he turned and left her with a now very distressed John.

Carrie picked him up and tried to sooth him while she unbuttoned the front of her dress. He latched on easily and she held him close to her, relishing the bond between her and her child, thinking it might be the last time she would be allowed to feed her own son.



JOHN HAD DRIFTED OFF into a contented sleep. Carrie derived so much pleasure from the knowledge that his tummy was full and he was secure and warm, and she was the one who had provided his comfort. She wondered at Arnold and how he could dismiss John’s presence so easily, particularly as he’d said he wanted them to have their own child. His treatment of John didn’t bode well that he would be an interested and loving father, in fact, the opposite seemed true. She also wondered about his lack of interest in her. Not once had he attempted to kiss her or to touch her. She rubbed her hand across John’s downy head and frowned. Most men would at least have tried, but Arnold seemed to do everything he could to stay away from her. She hoped it would continue. Dolores had said that Arnold would expect her to be wifely in every way, including in the bedroom, but so far she had been mistaken. Carrie shivered. She couldn’t bear to think

about Arnold making advances to her, of lying down with him, of him knowing her like Johan had. And her knowing him in the same way. It made her sick to her stomach.



SHE LEFT JOHN SLEEPING and decided to explore. She'd seen Arnold leave the bungalow through the kitchen door and walk across the grass to one of the other bungalows, a visit perhaps to another family. He hadn't asked her to accompany him and her heart sank. A wave of disempowerment, of complete abandonment washed over her and she chastised herself. Why would I want to spend time with him, she thought? She knew Arnold was deliberately separating her from the very people she needed to get to know if she was to have any kind of life in Secunderabad. She inhaled sharply as tears pooled in her eyes; as angry with herself as she was with him. He was getting to her just as he'd wanted to, and she was allowing it.

'Memsahib.' Carrie started at the voice interrupting her thoughts. Gita put her hands together and bowed her head in the praying motion Carrie had seen many times since she had arrived India. It made her feel uncomfortable that another person felt compelled to do it, but she understood it. She, herself, had also been in a similar position in London, a position of subservience and powerlessness.

'My name is Carrie, Gita. I don't know the word you use.'

Gita raised her head and observed Carrie with questioning eyes. 'Madam?'

Carrie stared at her. 'My name is Carrie.'

'Madam.' Gita lowered her hands. 'I cannot call you that. The sahib...he will not like such...behaviour from me. I am here to serve you. Please, may I get you something, a drink perhaps? You must be very hot, not used to the heat in India yet. Perhaps some soda or maybe some chai? I can make it cool for you. It is very tasty...with cardamom and some sugar. It will give you strength.'

Carrie nodded. 'Whatever you think is best.' She watched as Gita made the chai tea, then cool the glass in a bowl of cold water. She passed the glass to Carrie with a napkin. 'Thank you, Gita. Is this tea?'

'Yes, memsahib. Chai. Black tea with spices and sugar. It is drunk very much here.'

Carrie sipped the drink, then smiled. 'It's delicious, Gita. Thank you.' Gita looked pleased. Carrie suddenly felt replenished and she realised she'd hardly had anything to eat or drink while they had been on the train. 'I need to look around the bungalow, Gita, to get to know my new home. Sergeant-Major Bateman has requested I do so. Perhaps you could show me the rooms.'

Gita nodded. 'Yes, Madam, of course.' She wiped her hands on a cloth then swept her arm out in front of her to indicate her workspace. 'This is where I do my work, Madam. For the sahibs and memsahibs. The kitchen, or *baawarchi khana*. I will prepare your meals and the sahibs meals here every day. And the milk for the baby when the wet-nurse is not here.' Carrie drew in a deep breath but decided not to say anything. She knew this was Arnold's idea and not Gita's. The kitchen was well-appointed with a small cooking range and plenty of cupboards in white wood, but little in the way of decoration. Everything in the bungalow was painted white and very plain. All Carrie could think about was the kitchen in Nightingale Lane, where everything seemed so much bigger and darker, and where Mrs. Coyle's voice filled the space with hustle and bustle and urgency. Then Pearl's face filled her mind's eye and she was overcome with sadness. Her grief at missing her friend got stuck in her throat and she fought to stop herself crying.

'Everything's white,' she said, her voice wobbling.

'For coolness, Madam.'

Carrie nodded. 'How long have you worked here?'

'I work...all my life, Madam, from when I was a girl. First I fetch water, the *pani wallah*, then wash sahibs and memsahibs clothes. Then make tea, the *chai wallah*, and clean house. Now I cook. I have worked upwards. To be a cook is a very good thing. My mother was cook before me.'

'Your English is very good, Gita. It's better than some of the people at home.'

'English is a language of Secunderabad and Hyderabad because of the many sahibs and memsahibs from England and Europe. We learn English.'

'What about your own language?'

'Urdu, Madam. Or Telugu.'

Carrie rolled the words around on her tongue and tried to say it the way Gita had. 'Urdu. Telugu.'

'Yes, Madam.'

'Will I have to learn Urdu?'

Gita shook her head. 'I think no, Madam. The other memsahibs did not learn. They always spoke English. It is why we had to learn.'

'What should I see now?'

'Perhaps the sleeping quarters, Madam, where you and the sahib shall sleep. And the room for your baby.'

Carrie glanced at her. 'John will sleep with me, in my...our room,' she said.

'Sergeant-Major Bateman said there shall be a room for the baby. His *ayah* will sleep on a cot next to him so if he wakes in the night

you will not be disturbed. He requested this.'

'Will you show me?'

Gita led her down a corridor leading from the kitchen. At the far end was a small bedroom with a cradle and a low bed on which there was a mattress and a thin cover. Over the cot was a net arranged on a frame.

'What's that?' Carrie asked.

'It's to stop the mosquitos biting the child, Madam. If the baby is bitten it will make him very ill.'

Carrie ran her hand across her face, now moist with perspiration, wondering what kind of world she had stepped into.

'Memsahib? You've had *chota hazri*?'

Carrie frowned. 'I'm sorry, Gita. What's that?'

'Your break of the long fast from night until dawn. To eat. You must eat, Madam, after the journey on the train. Train can be very bad. The food. The cooks buy from villagers along the journey. Sometimes it is not fresh, not good for you. And you must keep strength. For the baby. You're feeding him, yes?'

Carrie's eyes filled with tears and Gita gasped as Carrie shook her head, inhaling a deep breath and looking away. 'My husband...doesn't want me to look after my baby. He says an *ayah* will look after him. Who will she be? Why is she better for him than me, his own mother?'

'Memsahib,' Gita whispered, pressing her hands down to gently quieten Carrie. 'She is not better for your baby than his own mother. She will help you. You are memsahib, wife of the sahib. She is...*ayah* to help memsahib. She is *ayah* for a long time, since a young girl. You will need help so you can do the things you must do for your husband. It's the way of things.'

There was quiet. Carrie looked into Gita's eyes and saw something there she had felt so deeply herself. It was subservience, the need to please, the fear of being abandoned if she didn't obey the master and his wife. This fear is what Carrie knew from an early age, the dependency on others to give her work so she could contribute to her family and pay her way. This was Gita's position now and Carrie wondered how much she knew about her and Arnold's sham marriage. Even though she was Arnold's wife with an opportunity to change her life, she also knew the societal values she lived amongst would prevent her from ever rising above the randomness of her birth. Arnold hated her and would never support her or help her transition into the society she had married in to.

She realised she had been staring. Gita's gaze was steady and unflinching. Her dark brown eyes observed Carrie for a long moment. She knows what I am, thought Carrie. She glanced out of the window to the other bungalows that shone bright white in morning sun. On

the lawns and coming out of the bungalows were the young wives of some of the soldiers that were on the ship. They strolled between the banyan trees in twos and threes, like pastel-coloured butterflies in creams, pinks and peppermint greens, and carrying lace parasols to protect them from the sun's already intense rays. They walked with their coiffured heads pressed close as they gossiped and giggled, their voices carrying on the still air.

Gita stood quietly, the palms of her hands pressed together. 'Memsahib, you wanted to see the rooms?'

Carrie averted her eyes from the scene outside and nodded morosely. 'Yes, I should see them.'

'And the *ayah*, Madam. You will see the *ayah*?'

A wave of anxiety flowed through Carrie. 'Perhaps later, Gita. I'll see her later. I just need to get used to all of this.'

'And your clothes? I should hang them up, yes? In your room.'

'No, no, Gita, I'll do it. Don't worry. I brought very little with me from England.'

Gita frowned. 'You will need something lighter, memsahib. Your dress...it is a very dark and heavy cloth. You will be very hot.'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, yes, I know. I must ask Sergeant-Major Bateman. I should have the right things.'

As Gita led Carrie around the bungalow Carrie's mind was elsewhere. She finally realised just how unprepared she was for her new life in India. There were rules, she realised, controls and systems of the new society in India that she had yet to learn. And Carrie knew there was much to learn; the etiquette that woman like Dorothy already had instilled into them, and by which they would continue to live their lives even in a military station like Secunderabad, a world away from their British roots. Nothing would change for them because they were at the top of the hierarchy, it was in their interests for it to remain the same, and she, Carrie, would have to scramble up the societal ladder as well as she was able, because she knew her husband would not be willing to give her his hand to help her scale it.



Chapter 17

Dear Pearl,

Sorry I haven't written before. I would have written sooner but I was so worried you would not get my letter. We arrived here in Secunderabad only two days ago. It seems like a lifetime since I last saw you.

I'm a mother now, Pearl, to a little boy. John. He was born on the ship on the way to India. I think you know why I've chosen that name. He's a lovely baby, very calm and easy to settle. It was a shock giving birth on a ship. There was only one nurse to help, and a ship's doctor to check John afterwards, nothing like I thought it would be. At least it's over. I'm afraid I can't say it's something I would recommend but it's worth it when you look into the eyes of your new-born. I'm so in love with him already. I can't imagine life without him.

When we got to Bombay we stayed in a hotel. I've never stayed in a hotel before. The people were very nice, and kind to me and John, kinder than Arnold, that's for sure. You were right about him, Pearl. He's a nasty miserable man who hasn't a good word for me and John. He's barely looked at him. There's no hope for us as a married couple, I'm afraid. I could never love him and he surely doesn't love me or the baby. Happily, I've not had to do you know what yet. I hope it stays that way.

I miss you so much, Pearl. I never realised how much I loved London and how much it meant to me until I arrived in this strange country. Everywhere is dusty and dry and the heat is unbearable sometimes. Poor little John spends most of his time unclothed except for his nappy, and even that seems too much at times.

We're living in a bungalow. It's an Indian word meaning one storey house. If I can get some pictures I'll send them next time. We have servants here. Don't laugh. I know, it's funny isn't it, servants serving the scullery maid. I don't like it and I don't think I'll ever get used to it. My favourite is Gita. She's like the cook and the housekeeper but nothing like Mrs Coyle. Dear Mrs Coyle. I miss her too, and her funny ways, although they don't seem so funny now, not after what I've seen lately. We're having a 'soiree' tonight. That's what Arnold calls it. It means he's invited people to our bungalow for drinks and nibbles. Nibbles indeed. What a word. That's all we ever did wasn't it, nibble. There wasn't enough food around to do anything else. These nibbles are little bits of this and that, a bit like the Sterns had for their cocktail parties. Well anyway, it's what we've got for tonight. Gita helped me organise everything. Arnold even gave me some money to get a new dress. I had to go to a place called James Street where the shops are. Oh, Pearl, it's nothing like the West End. The shops are

really fuddy-duddy and the clothes! Well, I managed to get a pretty primrose coloured cotton overlaid with chiffon. It's about all that can be coped with in this heat. It looks very nice and I feel much better in it. More like the other girls here. I also bought some little buttoned shoes to match, and a tiny bag on a yellow cord. Arnold said he wants me to be the hostess but only the Good Lord knows how I'll manage that. I haven't got a clue.

The other girls here aren't very friendly, I'm afraid. They were very unkind to me and John and put me right in my place when we were on the ship. They all know what happened to me, that I had a bun in the oven before Arnold and I was married. And that he's not John's father. Arnold made sure they all knew it, too. He's really made things difficult for me, but I have to get on with it. Where else can I go? There's just one who seems nice but Arnold has warned me off her saying she's too good for the likes of me. Charming, eh?

I hope you're all alright. Has William gone yet? You must be so worried. It doesn't seem to be ending, does it, this war? Not like they said it would. I wish you were here, Pearl. I know people always write that when they're away, but I really mean it.

I've written to my mum and dad, but if you see them tell them I love and miss them. I know what they did was wrong but they're still my mum and dad aren't they? And keep safe, Pearl. You and William. Look after yourselves because besides John I feel like you're all I've got. Please don't forget me.

Your best friend,
Carrie.



THE BUNGALOW WAS QUIET. Carrie was with John, laying him in his cot while the *ayah*, Amrita, stood silently on the other side. Carrie glanced up at her and the *ayah* lowered her eyelids once and nodded slowly. Amrita had said nothing since they had been introduced by Gita the evening before; it was as though Amrita knew exactly what was expected of her, there was nothing for her to say, and why would Carrie object? Carrie had been swept along by Amrita's quiet countenance, her calm efficiency with John, and part of her felt calmed by her too. At their first meeting Amrita had simply held her arms out for John as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Carrie had looked quickly at Gita with concern and Gita's eyes had widened as if to say, he'll be safe. There's nothing to it. Trust her. So Carrie had. From that moment the *ayah* had not left their side, sitting quietly while Carrie fed John and not interfering until Carrie was ready to relinquish him. That night, the *ayah* had brought John to Carrie for his last feed before bedtime, then whisked him away to his

bedroom. Carrie had stared after them and Gita had laid a gentle hand on her arm.

‘Do not worry yourself, memsahib. I know Amrita very well. She will love your baby like her own. She will teach him, and play with him when you are busy. It is the way of things.’

Carrie had nodded and looked down at her hands in her lap. She swallowed hard to stop the tears that threatened to glaze her eyes. ‘She seems very young.’

‘Yes, she is still young, but very caring. He is your child, Madam. He is still your child. And you are to be busy. The sahib says there is much for us to do. Tomorrow night we will have many of your husband’s guests here. And you will be the hostess. You are his wife and you will make the evening so pretty.’ Carrie’s eyes widened and a frown settled between her brows. Gita smiled gently and patted her hand. ‘With my help, memsahib, of course. With my help.’

Carrie smiled at the woman who seemed to know what she was thinking. ‘Thank you, Gita,’ she whispered. ‘Thank you so much.’



CARRIE STOOD IN THE kitchen by the large pine table and watched Gita as she prepared the food for Arnold’s guests. She wrung her hands together, the evening heat making her new dress stick to her back. In the shop on James Street the dress had given her confidence, but the sound of the guest’s voices in the large sitting room had stripped any assurance she’d felt away. Now she was back to being Carrie Dobbs, scullery maid, not Carrie Bateman, wife of Sergeant-Major Bateman, and she knew why she wanted to stay in the kitchen. It was where she was comfortable, it was where she knew best, and in the kitchen she could remain invisible, a requirement of her past life where she was to be not seen and not heard.

She glanced out of the window into the increasing darkness wishing she could run away, through the lantern lit bungalows towards the lake in Secunderabad, the Hussain Sagar. She’d heard it was very beautiful, where people went for quietness and to think. There she knew she would find peace, a safe haven away from the vicious tongues of the women who were sitting in the most comfortable chairs in her home and expected to be offered hospitality. She hated Arnold for putting her through this. He knew the difficulties she’d had with some of the other women, yet here they were, the very ones who had made her feel so wretched, holding court in her home, their loud, flirtatious giggles ringing out at one of the soldier’s crude jokes.

Gita efficiently placed canapes on a large platter and raised her

eyes to meet Carrie's. She'd heard the disgusting joke and the women's over-loud laughter. She shook her head and as Carrie leant forward to take the platter from the table she stopped her.

'No, Madam. You are not servant. You are hostess. I and Aashi, my daughter will take the platters into your guests. You may fill glasses if a guest requires it, yes, but...you are not '*naukar*', Madam. You must be hostess.'

'But, Gita...'

Gita gently laid a hand on her arm. 'Madam. I will be there,' she whispered.

Carrie nodded and inhaled a breath that wobbled in her chest then reluctantly turned and left the kitchen and made towards the sitting room. Gita and Aashi, Gita's teenage daughter, dressed in a sari of pale blue followed her, carried the huge, decorated platters of exotic foods and sweetmeats. As Carrie stepped towards the other guests, another peel of laughter rang out which came to an abrupt halt when the owner saw Carrie. The other guests followed her gaze and immediately stopped their conversations. Carrie slowed but Gita pushed gently into the small of her back with the platter.

'Madam,' she said loudly to Carrie so the guests could hear. 'Your chosen food for the guests? Where would you like me to present it?'

Carrie looked around the room, then pointed to an ornate dresser standing against an unadorned wall. 'On there,' she said. 'I think it will be perfect.'

Gita nodded and went across to the dresser with Aashi following. 'And the drinks, Madam. May I help you pour?'

Carrie nodded. 'Thank you, Gita.' She swallowed hard then addressed the room. 'May I ask what everyone is drinking? Gita and I will refill your glasses. We don't want you to hold an empty glass.' Carrie smiled to herself. She remembered Mrs. Stern saying this once at one of her dinner parties.

First to step forward was Dorothy Tremaine.

'Carrie, darling,' she said in a louder than necessary voice. 'How lovely you look. The colour of that dress is divine, so spring-like, and the little shoes to match. Exquisite. You have excellent taste, my dear.' She thrust her glass forward and Carrie went across to the drinks cabinet, miraculously stocked with alcohol of every kind. She nodded her thanks to Gita who smiled and bobbed a slight curtsy. 'We have champagne, Dorothy. Would you like some?'

'Champagne! Did you hear that, everyone,' she said turning her head to the other guests and holding up her glass. 'We're being treated like royalty. And look at the label. Divine. Champagne for me please.'

Carrie poured champagne into Dorothy's glass until the bubbles almost spilled over the top and her eyes met Dorothy's pensive gaze.

‘Just be yourself, darling,’ she said under her breath. ‘You’re doing really well.’ Carrie gave a small smile as some of the other guests came forward holding out their glasses. She didn’t know whether the label on the bottle meant it was a good one, or whether it was one Gita had bought from the local merchant, but whichever it was it was popular and the six bottles she had placed in the drinks cabinet soon ran out.

‘Arnold, old boy. You’re letting us down. Out of champagne, apparently,’ said one male voice who Carrie could see belonged to one of his superior officers.

Arnold looked cross and joined an awkward Carrie standing by the cabinet not knowing what to do. ‘Why didn’t you order enough?’ he hissed. ‘You must have known how much they’d need. You’ve worked in service all your life. You surely know how much people drink at these things.’

‘I’m sorry, Arnold. I didn’t order it. Gita did.’

‘Oh, right, trying to blame the staff now are you?’

‘No, that’s not what I meant. If it wasn’t for her we wouldn’t have had any. You didn’t say what you wanted. Can we not get more? There’s a merchant on James Street. I think it’s where Gita goes.’

He grimaced at her. ‘Where do you think you are? You’re not in someone’s back room playing cards with the neighbours and can go off when you please to get more plonk. You’re the hostess. You should know these things.’

Gita and Aashi came into the living room holding ice buckets complete with bottles of red and white wine. ‘Sahib,’ said Gita, breathless. ‘We have the best wine here, sir. It comes from the cellar of the mayor. It is only the best.’

Arnold nodded. ‘Very good. Serve it, Gita. Hopefully no one will notice. They’ve all had a lot to drink at the club already. And get that girl of yours to serve the food.’ He threw Carrie a disgruntled look. ‘We’ll talk about this later. Maybe you can try and mingle with our guests. Just talk to them, damn it. That’s if you’re capable.’ He wandered back to the little knot of male guests in the centre of the room and lit a cigarette shaking the match out and throwing it out of the window. Someone said something in a low voice and he bellowed with laughter, then turned and looked at Carrie. She lowered her head away from his gaze then turned away, sure they were discussing her.

‘Memsahib?’ Aashi was by Carrie’s side, holding the canapes. ‘Madam, you wish to eat? You must be hungry.’

Carrie shook her head. ‘No thank you. I’m not hungry.’

‘Madam,’ Gita said. ‘The baby. You must eat to feed him. Please, memsahib. You’ve eaten nothing all day. Please.’

Carrie stared at her. ‘Did those bottles really come from the

mayor's cellar?'

Aashi smiled at Gita and Gita nodded. 'Of course, Madam. Only the best for the sahib and his guests.'

Carrie laughed and took the platter from Aashi's hands, who gasped and turned quickly to her mother in horror. 'Let me do what I know best. It'll break the ice. I have to talk to these people. It's all I know. Follow me with tea plates and napkins, Aashi, and Gita, you follow with the wine. Are we ready?' The women nodded. 'Good. Let's go. Let's get these people fed and drunk,' she said, sotto voce, 'then maybe they'll go home.'



'YOU KNOW WE'RE PARIAHS, don't you?' said Captain Lawrence. 'Over in Blighty. That's how they see us.'

'David, I don't think it's quite like that,' said Dorothy. I think you're exaggerating rather. In fact I think many of our circle back home envy us. They think we're having a wonderful adventure; that we're incredibly brave mixing with a race of which we really have very little knowledge, and wonder at us taking the risk that we could be slaughtered in our beds at any moment, day or night.' She turned to Carrie and winked. Carrie gave a small smile as she stood by Arnold, an untouched glass of white wine in her hand. 'And what about the girls who come out here looking for husbands. Most of them find someone to take them on. They wouldn't dare go back home to Mama and Papa without finding someone. It costs an absolute arm and leg to get out here.' She raised her glass in David's direction. 'I should imagine you're in their sights, David, the very kind of man they're all looking for.'

He laughed and returned her raised glass. 'They would need to be fast runners, Dorothy, to catch me, I mean. I like to do the choosing, not be the chosen.' Everyone laughed, Arnold loudest of all and Carrie wished he'd stop drinking.

She wondered at his need for alcohol no matter what the situation was. He would drink to celebrate and to commiserate; whatever the occasion, Arnold took to drink. Maybe he needs it, she thought, to feel part of this group of people we've found ourselves in. We're nothing like them, not even Arnold, although he feels his star is in the ascendant. During the evening his voice had become louder and louder, his laughter more and more animated, particularly when David Lawrence said anything, regardless of whether it was particularly amusing or not. Even when Carrie was serving the Sterns she had never felt the need to ingratiate herself in front of them. She had done the job she was paid for, and to the best of her abilities. Her

thoughts went suddenly to Johan and she gasped. She hadn't thought of him for a while, whether by accident or design she didn't know which, but suddenly he appeared in her mind's eye smiling at her in the way that would make her stomach roll with love and desire. She took a quick swig from her wine glass and did her best to push the image away.

'You alright, darling?' Dorothy said, glancing quickly in her direction. Carrie nodded. 'Perhaps you need some air. It's rather stuffy in here.' Carrie nodded again and Dorothy took her arm and walked her out onto the veranda at the front of the bungalow. 'Sit, darling.' Dorothy pushed Carrie gently into a rattan peacock chair and sat opposite her on a lounge.

'You look beautiful, Dorothy,' Carrie said, smiling, her eyes on the stunning creation Dorothy was wearing. 'I love that dress. And is that the new length? Arnold would never let me wear something like that.'

'Oh, thank you, Carrie. I brought it over from London.' She looked down at the deep red velvet with red chiffon sleeves decorated with flashes of gold thread. 'This is a Paul Poiret. His new look is based very much on the Orient. I thought it was ideal for the kind of weather we have over here. The velvet is a new lightweight design.'

'And your husband doesn't mind you showing your ankles?'

She laughed. 'No, the opposite. Marcus loves it. He says he's proud of me and if a gentleman wants to look at my ankles he should have the pleasure.'

Carrie's eyes widened. 'What a lovely thing to say.'

Dorothy nodded. 'Yes, he's wonderful, although I did notice a few looks from some of the other girls. Not sure they approved but I don't care. They'll be wearing the same thing next week, mark my words. They haven't got an original thought between them.' Carrie looked down to her hands in her lap and twirled her wineglass in her fingers. 'And what about you, Carrie? You've done so well this evening. I can't tell you how brave I think you are. Bravo, darling.'

'I don't feel very brave. What I feel is out of my depth. I didn't order enough champagne, well, I didn't order any champagne. Gita did it. Then she saved my bacon by finding some wine from somewhere. Arnold wasn't happy. He more or less told me I was useless. I'm beginning to think he's right.'

Dorothy took Carrie's wineglass and placed it on a little bamboo table next to her, leant forward and took her hands in her own. 'Now you listen to me,' she whispered. 'You must stop thinking like that, Carrie. You are not useless. You've had a complete change of life. You've recently given birth...on board a damned ship for goodness sake, and you've put on this wonderful evening for us all. If Arnold is complaining, then I can assure you he is the only one. And even if

Gita did help you, it's only what the rest of us would do. Do you think we'd go down to the merchants ourselves and haggle with them over bottles of champagne? Do you think I and the other girls would be standing at the kitchen table kneading bread to feed our husband's guests? Never. Ever. Carrie, I've never done anything like that. I can barely boil an egg. And as for Gita, she's a member of your husband's staff. It's what she's paid to do. If anyone should know that, it's you.'

'But he's so critical.'

Dorothy squeezed her hands then handed her the wineglass. 'Drink some more, darling. You need it.'

Carrie sipped at the wine and decided she had nothing to lose. 'He doesn't love me.'

Dorothy sat back in her lounge. 'I know he doesn't love you, and he probably never will. You told me on the train out here, didn't you, what it was all about, and now I can see it for myself.'

Carrie stared at her, her breath caught up in her throat. 'Is it so obvious?'

'It is to me. Marcus would never treat me the way Arnold treats you. I know what it is to be loved, Carrie, and you are not loved. I know exactly why you're here. It's almost like you're the opposite of the fishing fleet. They come out here to find a husband, usually someone with some status who, when they return to England, will give them the life their parents wanted for them. It's a terrible way to get a husband, but with the war and all the young men volunteering and being sent to the front, including those with any kind of standing in the community being recruited as commissioned officers, they probably feel they have no choice. You've come here to give Arnold married status. I worked it out when I discovered what had happened to you. And with a child as well he's viewed as a married man with a child; stable, committed and good for promotion. I hate to say it because that last thing I want is to upset you, but you've been used, Carrie. I can't imagine what your parents were thinking when they got you together with Arnold Bateman but I don't think they were thinking about you and the life you would have. There's nothing worse than being with a man who doesn't respect you.'

'Do you like him?' Dorothy raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Carrie's shoulders slumped forward. 'So what do I do? What would you do?'

'You must toughen up, darling, or you will not survive. I don't know if you've realised it, I rather think you may have, but it's brutal out here. This is not a holiday destination for bright young things. We're here to make our husbands' lives easier. I'm one of the lucky ones. Marcus would no sooner disrespect me than fly unaided. My father would roust him out and his reputation would disappear

overnight, but in all honesty Marcus isn't that kind of man. You have a different situation with Arnold. What would your parents do if he abused you?'

Carrie's eyes glittered with tears. 'Nothing,' she said in a small voice. 'They wouldn't even know. My dad...he would care, but I'm not sure about my mother. He paid her you see.'

Dorothy looked horrified. 'What!'

'Arnold. He paid her to ensure I would accompany him. And she was happy because she'd already told me I had to leave our home because I was carrying John. It's not done in our community, to go with someone outside of it. Johan got married so I couldn't even tell him I was pregnant, in fact, my family told me not to tell him because it would ruin their reputation. I didn't know where to go, Dorothy. I had nowhere to go so I couldn't put up a fight because if I hadn't come out here me and John would have ended up on the streets, just two more people nobody wants. There are lots of them in London, mostly women. I don't think I have to explain what would have happened to us.'

'Oh, Carrie. I'm so sorry. We have no idea, do we, in my world. This is why the suffragette movement must win. Women must have a voice, otherwise this dreadful situation you're in will continue, and we can't let that happen.'

'The suffragette movement? Aren't they the ones who break windows and get put in prison? And you said men have volunteered for the army, Dorothy. I thought they were called up.'

'Oh, no. The young men going off to war have all volunteered. They want to do their bit for their country.'

'He lied to me,' she said, astonished.

Dorothy frowned. 'Who, darling?'

'Joe, from back home. He told me he'd been called up to fight, but he hadn't had he? He went because he wanted to. He left Molly and their little kids to fend for themselves to go off to war.' She shook her head. 'That's terrible.'

'Is it?'

'Don't you think so?'

'Not really. I think they're very brave men who want to do their bit for their country. Without them where would we be? Sometimes you have to stand up for what you believe in, even if it's not the safest or most convenient thing to do. Your friend obviously felt he should do something. He saw other young men leaving to fight and thought he should do the same.'

'But his family.'

'I know, Carrie but...bravery can't always be nice and clean and expedient. We all need to have something to fight for, particularly

when what is happening is unjust. That's why I believe in the suffrage movement. I have stood with those women, I have listened to their stories. The woman who threw a brick through the window of Fortnum and Masons in London. She was arrested for causing havoc, for believing in her cause. And do you know that Fortnum and Masons sent their hampers to the women in prison, so they would have something decent to eat. They actually believed in what they were trying to achieve was admirable. These women have been accused of being unladylike, of being unseemly simply because they want to be equal to men. They are tough, Carrie. They grit their teeth and they will not allow anyone to sway them from what they know is right. Some who took part in the hunger strike have actually been fed by force with a tube down their throats, held down by men. It's a disgusting way to treat another human being just because they don't agree with men. Just think, if you had been equal to a man you could have stood your ground and refused to marry Arnold Bateman. You and your baby could have made a life together in London because you would have had as many opportunities as any man, and you wouldn't have been forced to live in a place that's wasn't your choice.'

'It wasn't a man who sent me here, Dorothy.'

'No, but it's a man who is treating you like a slave, an object, Carrie. It is a man who is making you feel small, who is trying to humiliate you in front of his friends. I know you think there isn't one person here you can call a friend. You must understand that I don't consider anyone here a friend, only my darling husband. And you, if you'll have me.'

'Arnold said I mustn't befriend you.'

Dorothy sat up quickly, looking astonished. 'Why ever not?'

'Because I'm not of your station. Because I was a scullery maid and you're a lady. We come from different worlds. In London I would probably be the one who cleaned and set the grate in the room you'd take tea in, the one who polished the silver spoon with which you stirred your tea, the one who would invisibly straighten up the room when you'd left. That was me, Dorothy. I was the one who did all that, and Arnold likes nothing better than to rub my nose in it. I've no doubt that after tonight I'll be in trouble, talking to you like this, away from the rest of the party.'

'I assure you, you will not. I think your husband has forgotten that we know where he comes from and who he is, that he comes from the same community as you do, and yet he is in your bungalow speaking quite freely with my husband, and his superior. David Lawrence will brook no ill treatment of you, Carrie. He would not be best pleased if he knew.'

Carrie shook her head. 'Please don't say anything, Dorothy. Arnold

will make my life hell if he thinks I've been talking about him behind his back, especially to you. And if it affects his career my life won't be worth living. There's nothing I can do. I'm stuck here until I can find a way to leave and go back to London.'

'To what, Carrie, and to where?'

Carrie closed her eyes and swallowed hard. 'I don't know, Dorothy. I just don't know.'



Chapter 18

‘Memsahib, memsahib. May I speak with you?’ Gita ran into the sitting room where Carrie was reading a letter from Pearl, at her side a Moses basket where John lay amusing himself and trying to roll from side to side. At two and half months old he had begun to smile and gurgle and play with his toes. Carrie was besotted with him and everything she did was for John, to keep him safe and secure and to benefit his happiness. She knew they would be in Secunderabad for some time yet. The previous two months had flown by and she had scarcely had time to think about anything other than running her household.

She had taken Dorothy’s words to heart and they and Dorothy’s support had given her strength. She had been shocked to discover that Dorothy supported the suffragette movement. Carrie had believed to be fortunate enough to be part of a certain society, the upper class as she saw it, would have been enough to satisfy any women, but she had quickly realised she was mistaken. She also realised that when Florrie had recruited Arnold Bateman as Carrie’s husband, she had been utterly powerless. Her opinion had not been sought. There was no argument to be had. Florrie was her mother and Arnold was far older than Carrie. And Florrie had been paid. It had been a business arrangement that Florrie would never renege on because it would have meant giving back the payment Arnold had given her, the money which very likely kept Carrie’s family in London from the breadline for many months. Carrie knew that Florrie felt that because she was her daughter it was Florrie’s right to make the decision for the rest of her life. Arthur’s opinion didn’t come into it, because Carrie was sure if it had she would be at home in Whitechapel pushing John’s pram down their street with Elsie and her own baby, a girl she’d named Rose.

She looked up when Gita came into the room. ‘Yes, Gita. Is there something wrong?’

‘Oh no, Madam. It is about the wedding.’

Carrie frowned. ‘The wedding? Whose wedding?’

‘It is the wedding of Aashi, my daughter and Devak Mistry. There will be...festivals, celebrations. I thought, Madam, you could be...part of it.’

Carrie leant back in her chair and looked at Gita for a long moment. ‘Part of it? How?’

‘You could join with Aashi and me, to help with wedding and

decorate. I thought, Madam, it would help you.'

Carrie looked down at her letter and sighed. 'You're very thoughtful of me, Gita. I'm guessing you know I'm not really a memsahib, at least, not like the ones you're used to.'

Gita's expression tumbled into one of utter regret, her eyebrows knotting together. 'Madam. Please...'

Carrie drew in a deep breath. 'Well, you're right.' She looked up at Gita and smiled. 'I think I'm more like you and your family than the women who came to India on the same ship. Their lives were very different from mine. I was in service before I came here. I did a job not unlike yours.' Gita nodded. 'Yes, memsahib, but it is not important.'

'It's not important to me, Gita, and I'm very thankful it's not important to you and your family. You've shown me every respect and kindness since I arrived in Secunderabad and I'm grateful for it, but I'm very much afraid it's important to my husband and his friends.'

'But Memsahib Tremaine, she is your friend, yes?'

Carrie nodded. 'She has tried to help me become part of her society, but to be part of it you must be like them. You must have their upbringing, their education, and their memories. I have none of that. I'm not ashamed to tell you, Gita. I'm not ashamed.'

'Why would you be ashamed, Madam? You know about life. You have worked to put food on the table. That is nothing to be ashamed of.'

'We know that. In our eyes it is something to be proud of. In our society we know we're important because without us our families will not survive. It's different in their society. It's all there for them from the moment they're born, the wealth, the society, it's like an exclusive club to which I'll never had admission. They will never understand.'

A protracted silence followed between the two women until Gita broke it. 'Madam. You must be strong. I have seen it...I have seen what they do.'

Carrie frowned. 'What do you mean, Gita?'

Gita's eyes widened when she realised she'd said too much. 'Oh, Madam, nothing. I...I see they are not the same as you. I have worked in this house for many years and I have seen many things. The sahibs and the memsahibs are not like us. They do not live the same way. They do not think before they act. They eat and drink so much,' she put her hand to her chin in thought, 'wasteful, I think is the word. They...do everything to...too much. And their lives do not have rules of faith, not like in India. Faith is...everything. They have so much. So very much, but they waste too much.'

Later that day, Arnold appeared in John's bedroom as she was putting him down for his nap.

‘Where is the *ayah*? Should she not be doing that?’

Carrie straightened her back as she gently held John’s fingers. ‘Her husband is ill. She needed some time to take care of him. I told her to take all the time she needed.’

Arnold looked cross. ‘You didn’t think to ask me?’

Carrie leant against the cot and folded her arms. She felt herself bristle at Arnold’s criticism of her. Yet again he’d found something to berate her for. ‘Why would I ask you? You have your work, don’t you? If I’d said anything to you, you would have said it was my place to run the house which is exactly what I’m doing. Make your mind up, Arnold.’

‘That’s not what I meant. The *ayah* is a member of staff. I hired her. It’s up to me to decide whether she’s required...or not.’

She walked past him into the corridor connecting the bedrooms and the living quarters. ‘Well, it’s too late. I’ve already decided.’

She went out to the veranda and sat in the rattan peacock chair. Arnold followed her, her answers to his questions unsatisfactory. She had overstepped the mark. She had made a decision that only he should make.

‘Next time you must ask me. I’m not paying staff for doing nothing.’

‘That’s your decision, but I’m more than capable of looking after my own son. I think I’ve already told you that. It makes no difference to me whether she’s here or not. The *ayah*, whoever she is will never have overall care for John. I’m his mother and I will be the one to oversee his care.’

Arnold clenched his fists and Carrie noticed his knuckles turn white with fury. ‘I notice you and Dorothy Tremaine talk a lot.’

Carrie nodded. ‘And?’

‘I thought I told you not to get too friendly with her. She has...ideas she probably shouldn’t have for a women of her standing.’

Carrie smiled to herself. So here it was. Here was the real reason Arnold didn’t want her to associate with Dorothy. ‘You mean her ideas about suffrage. Isn’t that what it’s called? I’ve never really taken much notice of it. Those women aren’t like me. I thought you would have known that. I was too busy working my arse off to go on protests marches. Too many fires and grates to scrub and set, too many potatoes to peel, too much bowing and scraping to do. You know all about my life before, Arnold. I don’t know why you’re getting into such a tizzy about it.’

‘A tizzy? I’m soldier, woman. I don’t get into a tizzy. And maybe you could watch your language while we’re talking, and in front of the servants. You don’t seem to have any dignity.’

She stood and pressed her face as close to his as she could without

inhaling his tobacco breath. 'Oh, I do, Arnold. I have dignity, but it's just not about pretending to be someone I'm not. I know why I'm here. The servants know why I'm here. They see no love between us, no signs of affection and certainly you have no feelings other than degrading ones about John, a poor baby who can't defend himself. Yet. I know who I am and where I've come from unlike you, and let's face it, if I didn't, thank goodness I've got you to remind me.' At that defining moment every ounce of hatred she felt for Arnold left her body and was projected towards him like a dart. It was as though everything around them had dissolved, the bungalow, the blazing hot sun in an azure sky, the banyan trees, the wagtails flying overhead and settling on the branches in flocks of twittering mayhem, everything stilled, everything stopped.



SHE CAME TO ON THE veranda. All she could remember was a flash of something coming towards her face and connecting with her cheekbone in an explosion of pain. She lay there for a moment, trying to get her breath, struggling to come to terms with her awkward position on the dusty floorboards. She put her fingers up to her cheek, wincing at the tenderness slicing through the side of her face.

Raising herself up on her elbow she took a breath, then made a grab for the chair to help her get to her feet. Nausea rose from her stomach to her throat and she wretched. She put one foot in front of the other, her gait unsteady, holding onto the door frame around the bungalow's entrance. The sitting room was empty; quiet, cool, the same as it was before, as though nothing had happened, and she had simply imagined that Arnold Bateman had thrown a punch at her face and felled her and left her lying unconscious on the veranda. She wondered that he had attacked her in such a public place, but then she knew that most of the Indian Army Officers and their wives were at the Secunderabad Club, eating and drinking and playing cards. This is where Arnold spent most of his free time and where she knew he would be, carousing with his friends and not caring one jot about the violence he'd shown her.

Carrie staggered into the sitting room, sinking down onto one of the chairs and putting her head gingerly in her hands. A rustling sound in the corridor made her stomach roll with fear, terrified it was Arnold. She lifted her head slightly and breathed a sigh of blessed relief. Gita stood in the entrance nervously wringing her hands.

'Madam,' she gasped. 'What has happened? I must get doctor, yes?'

'No, Gita, please, I'll be alright.' Carrie knew the so-called doctor who attended the inhabitants of the cantonment was probably in the

same place as Arnold; standing next to the bar in the Secunderabad Club playing drinking games. If you had reason to call a doctor in the Trimulgherry *mofussil*, which was what their station was called, you did not call for him.

‘Oh, Madam. Your face. I...I don’t know what to do.’

‘Nothing. Nothing. Go about your work. Pretend you haven’t seen me. No good can come of you getting involved.’

‘Please, let me help you.’ She called Aashi to assist her. ‘Bring a bowl with warm water and a clean cloth. Hurry, girl.’

‘Gita, if he finds you helping me it means you know what he has done and it will do you and your family no good. He will take it out on you, perhaps dismiss you. I couldn’t bear it.’

Aashi joined them holding a bowl and some small scrupulously clean cloths over her wrist. In one of her hands she held a small bottle, brown glass with a cork stopper.

‘What’s that?’ Carrie asked.

‘It is pineapple juice mixed with turmeric and aloe. It will reduce the swelling on your face and help with the pain. It is something we use regularly so you need not be afraid of it. You must let me help you, memsahib.’

‘Carrie. My name is Carrie.’

Gita sat back on her heels and observed Carrie. ‘Madam,’ she whispered. ‘I cannot call you that.’

Carrie stared at her, her eyes glittering with tears, her understanding of the similarities between them greater than ever. ‘Yes. Yes you can. It’s my name. He is not here in the daytime and it’s the time for me to be myself. When we are alone, when we’re together in the house you can call me Carrie. I’m not a memsahib, I’m not better than you. My achievements are not greater than yours. I’ve done nothing or have nothing to deserve that word, that title, if that’s what it is. It has no meaning for me, Gita. It isn’t who I am. I am Carrie Dobbs and I always will be.’

Aashi placed the bowl next to Carrie’s feet and Gita poured some of the liquid out of the bottle into the warm water then dipped the corner of a cloth into it and began to bathe the wound on Carrie’s cheek. ‘I have never seen this, Madam...Carrie. I have never seen a sahib beat his wife and cause her pain.’ Her eyes met Carrie’s. ‘He is a cruel man.’ Carrie nodded and closed her eyes. The warmth of the liquid and Gita’s soft touch were soothing. Her head ached from where she’d fallen onto the veranda floor and when she felt the back of her head it was swollen. When Gita had finished she instructed Aashi to get rid of the evidence of their help then gently pulled Carrie to her feet. ‘You must sleep, Carrie. Tonight is the Regimental Ball to greet the new soldiers. You are to go with Sahib Bateman. Had you

forgotten?’

Carrie looked at her in horror. ‘I can’t go. Not like this. Look at my cheek. How can I face the others like this?’

‘I’ll help you,’ Gita said. ‘Aashi will make a poultice of pineapple and we will place it on your cheek while you sleep. You must rest. The pineapple will stop the swelling. We have cosmetics for Aashi’s wedding. They will cover the marks.’

‘I’ve never used cosmetics, I’m not sure I’m allowed to. The women here think they are used only by “certain” women and look down on them. I heard them say so when I was on the ship. They wouldn’t speak to one of the women in the fishing fleet because she wore cosmetics to catch a husband. They said she looked like a woman of the night. I heard them when I was sitting on the deck by myself, laughing at her and saying bad things. They hate me already, Gita. Everything I do is wrong, and Arnold...he will criticise me.’

Gita shook her head and sighed. ‘Don’t worry, Carrie. Not colour, no colour will be used, but something on your face to help with dark marks. No one will know, I promise. No one will know. You must rest now. You will sleep this afternoon and Aashi and I will take care of your son while you sleep.’ Carrie lay gratefully on the bed and drifted quickly into a deep sleep. Gita placed a light cover across her then stroked a hand across Carrie’s forehead before closing the gauze curtains around her. Aashi entered the bedroom, her steps soft, her face etched with sadness.

‘You must be careful, Talli. Sahib Bateman will not look kindly upon you for helping her.’

Gita nodded without looking at her daughter. ‘She is the same age as you, Aashi. If this ever happens to you I hope someone will take pity on you and help you. She is in a foreign country and has no one. You have me and Auntie Shalini.’ She shook her head and raised her eyes to her daughter’s concerned ones. ‘Men can be unfeeling. They do not understand a woman’s heart.’

‘And Devak Mistry. Why did you choose him for me? Does he understand a woman’s heart?’

‘He comes from a good family, daughter.’

‘He makes trinkets.’

Gita frowned at Aashi. ‘He is a craftsman, Aashi. He is making your wedding jewellery from the finest yellow gold and the most beautiful stones. You are very fortunate.’

‘But I want to see the world. India is just one country. There are so many more to see, so many places to explore...like England and America. The streets are paved with gold there. People live in big houses and they have good jobs. Women are changing, Talli. I want to spread my wings. Memsahib Bateman has come to India from

England. She has travelled on a ship across the sea. I have not even seen Bombay. I would love to go. The saris are brighter and more beautiful than ours and edged with golden thread. There are marketplaces selling everything you could want and houses painted all the colours of the rainbow. There are more people to meet and more things to do.'

Gita took her arm and led her into the corridor, shutting the bedroom door behind her. 'Yes, and Memsahib Bateman has married a man who strikes her and who doesn't love their child. She came to India from England on a ship with people she does not know to be beaten by her husband. Do you envy her?'

Aashi rolled her eyes then glanced at her mother. 'No, Talli. Of course not.'

'Then be grateful, Aashi. And be most, most careful what you wish for.'



'WILL YOUR WIFE BE JOINING us, Bateman?'

'Yes, sir. She had some domestic requirements to attend to with servants but she will be here. Our *ayah* is unwell. She needed to be sure the child is cared for. She will be here soon.'

'I certainly hope so. I've yet to meet her. A little bird tells me she's rather friendly with Dorothy Tremaine.'

'Er, they seem to have found some common ground, certainly.'

'Mm, not sure it's a good thing, Bateman. Dorothy Tremaine is too clever by half. We don't need clever girls here. She should remember where she is. She knows how things are in this neck of the woods. We've come here to protect the Empire in the absence of the 9th Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade doing their bit in France. The 4th must uphold everything dear to the Emperor of India, King George V. It would seem we're not just defending the Empire from our enemies but from some unwanted musings from a few of our silly women. I hope your wife isn't one of them, Bateman. What do you think, my dear?' He turned to his wife, Lady Mabel Dimmock, commonly known as the "*burra*" memsahib, the Queen Bee of society and social leader of the Trimulgherry station, in Secunderabad and beyond. She was a woman of around fifty and had spent many years in India with her husband, Field Marshall Bruce Dimmock.

'A flash in the pan, my dear. Nothing for you to worry about. These girls want something they can't have. I'm so very glad we're here in India and not in London where they're causing an awful lot of trouble, and for what? It won't get them anywhere, I can assure you.' She crossed her arms under her not insubstantial bosom. 'These

protestors will be squashed. Why on earth do they want to vote when men have been doing it with some success for years? Dorothy Tremaine's voice will fall on stony ground I can assure you.'

Her husband drew himself up and lifted his chin to look at the ceiling, deep in thought. 'Well, we must hope she never gets to meet Malcolm Darling. The man thinks equality is everything. We all know it will never work, particularly with the natives. It would give her new ideas. He is friend to that damned Bloomsbury woman, what's her name? The one with the strange ideas.' He looked to his wife for an answer but she didn't give it. 'Whatever it is, I must make a note to have a word with Colonel Tremaine about keeping his wife in order.'

Arnold's eyes went from one to the other as Field Marshall Dimmock and his wife spoke to each other as though he wasn't present and were sitting in their own drawing room instead of the Secunderabad Club where they were surrounded by people drinking, eating and playing cards. He knew he must also make a note to ensure Carrie didn't get too close to Dorothy Tremaine. He had a feeling his career trajectory would depend on it.



'WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?' Arnold whispered to Carrie as she slid into the chair next to him at the long table. 'You're the last one to arrive. Are you doing your best to make an entrance, is that what it is? You've a long way to go before you do that.'

She turned and looked at him. 'What do you think I was doing, Arnold? Perhaps you haven't noticed.' Reluctantly, his eyes went to her cheek. 'Yes, that's right. I've been trying to hide the bruise and swelling on my face, the one you put there. I didn't think you'd be too pleased if I turned up at your Military Ball with a black and blue cheek. Would there not be questions asked? And what would I have said? Oh, don't worry, my husband punched me and sent me to the ground and left me unconscious. Is that what you wanted, Arnold?'

His face darkened and he turned away. 'Maybe you could keep your voice down and later engage in some polite conversation with people who matter this evening. It will do us some good.'

'No, Arnold. It will do *you* some good.'



THE SECUNDERABAD CLUB was a low building constructed over two floors punctuated by two small turrets either side. It was a beautiful structure fashioned out of white stone in the bungalow style, yet spread over many square feet. Inside was a restaurant, a bar, a games

room for chess and other board games, and a ballroom where the Military Ball to welcome the newcomers to Secunderabad was being held. Outside, in the grounds was a tennis court, a croquet lawn and the beginnings of a swimming pool. Every whim was seemingly catered for.

The room was laid out with long tables running parallel with each of the four walls, in square formation and decked in pristine white tablecloths and sparkling silverware. Carrie eyed the three wine glasses at her place setting and wondered why anyone would need three glasses at one meal and the four sets of cutlery that seemed to all do the same job yet were of different sizes. In the centre of the tables were floral decorations in the red, white and blue of the Union flag, and tall pillar candles on round mirrors to reflect the flames twinkling in the low light.

Her eyes wandered over the room and she was aware her primrose yellow dress, the one she'd worn to the drinks party at the bungalow was much too ordinary in comparison to the other woman of the company. They were dressed in their finest, dresses probably brought to India from the fashion houses of London, or even sent to Secunderabad by their servants back in England, and the men were handsome in their dress uniforms. Even Arnold's appearance seemed to improve in the wearing of such an impressive costume. She noticed it made the soldiers sit straighter with an upright air, and behave with more decorum than she'd witnessed on the ship from England where anything seemed to be acceptable.

She spotted Dorothy at the end of their table near the front, who saw her at the same time, and waved. Carrie returned her wave and smiled.

'Who are you waving at?' asked Arnold.

'Dorothy. She's over there with Colonel Tremaine, near the front, next to that fat woman in the old-fashioned dress and the red-faced man with the big white moustache.'

'Can you not speak like that? The woman Dorothy Tremaine is next to is Lady Mabel Dimmock, wife of Field Marshal Dimmock. She is the doyenne of our community and you would do well to offer her some respect. And you can forget Mrs. Tremaine. She's nothing compared to Lady Mabel and you would do well to remember it. They are the very people who will make a difference to us.'

'What would you have me do? Should I shuffle over on my knees and kiss her hand?'

Arnold closed his eyes with impatience, rubbing his forehead with a white gloved hand. 'No. I just want you to behave like a lady. I want you to speak with them on equal terms but with some deference. We are the new company here. They've been here for years, and Lady

Mabel is at the top of the social pecking order.'

'Oh, is she. Well, she won't want to speak to me. In London I'd be clearing out her grates. She probably wouldn't even know I existed.'

'You're not in London. You're my wife and you will behave accordingly. It's why I married you, why I paid your mother a not insubstantial sum, and why I'm paying for you now. Everything you eat, wear, drink is paid for by me. I deserve some respect from you and I'm going to make sure I get it.' Carrie's eyes drifted back to Arnold as he spoke but then averted because she couldn't bear to watch his pallid face pulled into expressions of such disdain for her. She scanned the room while he spoke, his voice continuing to berate her in her left ear.

The first course was being served and she hoped it would be something she could stomach. Everything was so highly spiced, or made from things she had never come across in London and she had suffered for it. Gradually all the tables were served by Indian waiters dressed in white cotton suits and wearing huge colourful turbans. Their white gloved hands served soup with fingers of naan bread which Carrie welcomed with delight. A plain vegetable soup without spicing was exactly what she needed and she ate with gusto, the first meal she had truly enjoyed since leaving London. Satisfied, she felt stronger and more able to get through an evening she had been dreading. Because of her hunger she had finished her meal quickly, so she took the time to observe the people around her. She recognised many of the soldiers from the ship and their wives. She noticed they sat in a group on the right-hand table, below where Dorothy and her husband were seated. It was clear they had imbibed freely of the wine on the table. The giggling and jokes had gone up a notch, and after a particularly loud guffaw by one of the men, Carrie glanced at Arnold. These were his men and she remembered Captain David Lawrence telling him that they needed to be taken down a peg or two when they met him at the station in Secunderabad.

'They're noisy.'

He glanced up from his soup. Carrie noticed some of the diced vegetable had settled on his moustache and her stomach rolled. 'They're letting their hair down. As long as they do the job they're paid to do when they should, they won't do any harm.'

'Will you join them later?'

'We will join them later, for drinks in the bar. I expect you to stand by me.'



AFTER THE COMPANY HAD finished dining everyone made their way

through an elaborate archway into the bar while the waiters cleared the tables from the ballroom and made it ready for dancing. Carrie followed Arnold as he squeezed through the crowd of people standing around the bar. He spotted one of the soldiers in his unit and hailed him. Carrie smiled at the fellow and tried to look engaged, but the soldier completely ignored her and simply shook Arnold's hand, clapping him on the back like an old friend, turning away from her. Arnold didn't introduce them, and as Carrie knew no one standing near she remained quietly behind Arnold, not really knowing what was expected of her. Suddenly a hand on her arm pulled her to one side. It was Dorothy.

'Well, Carrie. What do you make of us all?' She looked around at the gathering jostling to get to the bar.

Carrie shrugged. 'I don't know, Dorothy. I don't know anyone.'

'Well, you know me, darling. Come and sit with Marcus and the others. Arnold's busy.' She threw a contemptuous look at Arnold's back which his friend saw but he didn't. The friend whispered something to Arnold who quickly turned, his expression and voice ingratiating. Carrie knew the toadying voice. It was the one he used when his superiors were close, and wasn't a tone he ever used for her.

'Mrs Tremaine. You're looking extremely well tonight.' Arnold bowed towards her then straightened up, a smug smile playing on his lips.

'Am I? I'm surprised you noticed, Sergeant-Major Bateman. You seemed so...engrossed.' Arnold's smile slipped swiftly from his face and his cheeks coloured with embarrassment. 'I'm dragging your wife off for a while. I know you won't mind.'

Arnold shook his head. 'No, no, of course not. I want Carrie to enjoy herself.'

Dorothy raised an eyebrow then smiled at Carrie. 'Come on,' she said. 'I'm getting battered by the anti-suffrage brigade over here and I need some support.' She slipped her arm through Carrie's then thought of something and turned back to Arnold. 'By the way, Sergeant-Major Bateman.' Arnold's eyes widened and he nodded apprehensively, swiftly apprehending Dorothy was not about to be kind to him. 'Hasn't this dress had a previous outing?' She grabbed Carrie's hand and twirled her in a circle in front of him.

'Er, I...I...I'm not sure. Carrie sees to that sort of thing.' He swallowed hard and his eyes went from Dorothy to Carrie and back to Dorothy. 'I would have thought.'

Dorothy glared at him. 'Then may I suggest you think again. It just won't do, Sergeant-Major Bateman.'



CARRIE WAS STUNNED. She knew Dorothy couldn't have known the danger she'd put her in because of how she'd spoken to Arnold, but she also knew he would take his humiliation out on her. Dorothy walked her across to a group of people sitting around a large rattan table in the bar. Field Marshal Dimmock and his wife were among them and Carrie sat nervously in a chair that had been pulled out for her next to Mabel Dimmock. She glanced over to where Arnold stood with his friends. He was staring at her with cold eyes and she shivered.

The discussion around the table had become heated. Lady Mabel was sitting on a seat made for two, a chaise where she could spread the skirts of her very old-fashioned, ornately decorated satin dress. The deep plum colour did not flatter the older woman's skin which had become dry and crêpey after spending too many hours in the Indian sun. The headdress she wore was also out-of-date; a tall cream feather attached to an ornate marcasite tiara fixed into her grey barrel curls. The feather fluttered dangerously each time Lady Mabel moved her head which she did regularly when she was trying to make a point to the rest of the company, which was most of the time.

'Of course,' she said in a very loud voice as Carrie took her seat. 'You young girls think life would be so much better for you if you were the same as your husbands. Do you not realise we do not need the vote nor would we ever use it if we were given permission. I hope if it was ever granted you girls would do the sensible thing and turn your backs on it. Why would you even consider it? We are fortunate to have husbands who have made their way in the world, and even more fortunate that they have chosen us to accompany them. Perhaps you should all think about what you would be doing with your lives or where you would be if it were not for their generosity.'

Carrie felt Dorothy bristle in the seat next to her. 'Lady Mabel, things are changing, and not just in Great Britain. Women are joining the suffrage movement all over the world. It has leapt great bounds in America in particular, and I can assure you they will not be distracted by a few arrests of their number. In London there are many woman of our class who are adamant we will receive the vote in this century, hopefully within the next decade. Why do you think it would be a bad thing? I'm afraid I don't understand.'

Lady Mabel's face darkened, and as she leaned forward to speak to Dorothy her satin skirt rustled. 'Because you are a woman, and women should know their place. I have always supported my husband. It is all I have thought about and concentrated on, and you should be doing

the same, Mrs. Tremaine.'

'I'm sorry, Mabel, but your ideas are very out-dated. You are from a different generation whose only aim was to please a man. The women of our generation are very different. We want to have power over our own lives, to make our own decisions and to be part of the political landscape of our country. Many woman work at the same time as raising their families and they, indisputably, have a right to equality when they are not only raising the next generation but are also putting food on the table. Surely you can see that.'

An embarrassed hush settled over the company and Carrie looked from one to the other wishing she wasn't sitting between them. She glanced up to find Arnold frowning at her and she looked down at her hands in her lap. She turned her face to her right where Dorothy was sitting and saw Marcus slip his fingers around Dorothy's hand and squeeze it and she smiled to herself. Marcus Tremaine was a modern man who loved and respected his wife and listened to her views, possibly the only one who existed in Secunderabad, perhaps the whole of India. Her thoughts went to Arthur and Florrie and she giggled. Florrie didn't need suffrage to get what she wanted. The only one who suffered was Arthur.

'And what are you smirking at, Mrs. Bateman?'

Carrie looked up at Mabel Dimmock with wide eyes and met her intrusive gaze. 'Me?'

'Yes, you, dear. You were smirking at something. I suppose you agree with Dorothy.'

Carrie swallow and glanced at Dorothy who raised her eyebrows. 'I'm...not sure I know enough about it to comment, Lady Mabel. I've seen the marches in London but...well, I didn't think they were marching for my benefit.'

'Quite right too. Of course they weren't marching for your benefit. I can see you are a girl with, well, let's say basic sensibilities, not used to a certain society. I implore you to stay that way and not listen to Mrs. Tremaine's scurrilous ideas. They will only cause harm.' Carrie stared at her and said nothing, but it seemed Lady Mabel wasn't finished with her. 'And what do you intend to do with your time here, Mrs. Bateman?'

As Carrie was about to answer, Arnold appeared and stood behind her which made her nervous. Without his presence, Carrie felt that she could hold her own, but she knew he was waiting for her to say something acceptable. She wasn't sure how to answer Lady Mabel, but then remembered Gita's suggestion. Smiling, she said, 'I'm going to help my housekeeper organise her daughter's wedding.'

There was a collective gasp from the ten or so guests gathered around their table, then giggling from two of the soldier's wives.

Carrie heard Arnold utter an expletive under his breath and Lady Mabel's complexion turned to stone. 'You're going to do what?'

Carrie inhaled a breath and felt Dorothy place a light hand on her forearm. 'I...thought...I might help.'

'A member of your husband's staff?' Carrie nodded. 'Why on earth would you do that?'

'Because she asked me.'

Lady Mabel sat back in her chair and glanced at her husband who shook his head. The other girls continued to giggle until Dorothy turned on them. 'Shut up, can't you?'

'I suppose this is your influence, Mrs. Tremaine,' said Mabel. 'The poor girl is unsound. Surely you know how wrong this would be?'

'Lady Mabel.' Carrie's small voice interrupted her and Lady Mabel turned her glare on her. 'Lady Mabel, it has nothing to do with Dorothy. Gita, our housekeeper asked if I would like to help. I agreed because I can't see why I shouldn't. She has helped me so why can I not return it.'

'Why should you not return it? I would have thought it was obvious. They are staff, my dear, and they are natives. The Indians serve us. We are the ruling class. Your housekeeper is your servant. She is paid...as a servant. It is not your place to help her. Goodness knows what would happen if this was permitted. It would unbalance everything we have come to know in India. The servants are in our homes to serve. You should dismiss your housekeeper. She should not be asking for your help.' She glanced up at Arnold. 'I'm surprised at you Sergeant Major Bateman, allowing your wife such freedoms with your staff.'

Carrie heard Arnold blustering behind her. 'I did not know, Lady Mabel, but of course, it will not happen.'

'I should think not. Just think what infectious diseases you may incur by mixing so closely with the natives.' She leant forward again, the feather in her headdress swaying dangerously as she warmed to her subject. 'They are not like us, my dear. They do not have the same habits, the same sensibilities. The men are...are rampant, and free with their susceptibilities. They do not have the intelligence or capabilities to govern themselves or to protect the empire which is precisely why you and your husband are here. You do not need to befriend your servants. There are plenty here within our own social class for you to befriend and I suggest you do just that, and we'll do our best to forget your faux pas.'

Carrie stared at her for moment than glanced around at the others sitting at the table. The girls were pressing their lips together; one had her gloved hand in front of her face to conceal her amusement. Dorothy squeezed Carrie's arm.

‘Don’t worry, darling,’ she said quietly. ‘It’ll come to nothing.’

Carrie turned towards her, her eyes stinging with tears. ‘What have I done? I don’t understand.’

‘I know, Carrie. I know.’



ARNOLD STRODE AHEAD of her down the long, tree-lined driveway leading away from the Secunderabad Club. He had waited until everyone had had enough to drink not to notice their absence, then had put his hand under her elbow and pulled her from her seat.

‘We should go.’

Carrie glanced at the huge wooden clock above the staircase in the ballroom. ‘But it’s only ten thirty, Arnold. I would have thought you would have wanted to stay later.’

‘I am staying later. You’re leaving. I’ve organised a *dak-garry* to take you back to Trimulgherry where you can do no further damage.’

‘A what?’

‘A cart, damn it.’

‘What if I don’t want to go? Dorothy said she’ll find me later. She’ll wonder where I am.’

He shook his head. ‘What you want is of no consequence. You’ve embarrassed me tonight, in front of my men and my commanding officers and their wives. I’ll be a laughingstock. What were you thinking?’

‘I still don’t know what I’ve done that’s so terrible.’

‘Ask your friend Dorothy Tremaine. She’ll tell you.’

At the end of the drive a cart waited. Carrie recognised the driver as Gita’s husband, Radhav which gave her some relief.

Carrie ran to keep up with Arnold. ‘You won’t dismiss Gita will you? It’s not her fault. She was just trying to help.’

Arnold stopped in his tracks and turned to look at her, pushing his hands into his pockets. ‘Dismiss Gita?’ He smirked and laughed with sarcasm. ‘Why would I dismiss *her*? It’s you I should get rid of. If I’d known what a liability you were...’ He turned and pointed to the cart. ‘There’s your transport. Try not to get into any more trouble.’



‘CAN YOU TAKE ME TO Hussain Sagar, Radhav?’

He frowned, then turned quickly to glance at Carrie. ‘The lake, memsahib? The master said you must go to the mofussil, the Trimulgherry station. The lake...it is far.’

‘I’ll be alright. It’s near James Street, isn’t it? I can find some

transport to take me back to the station. I'd like to walk near water, like I used to when I lived in London. St. Katherine Dock was just a walk away from where I lived. I went there to get away from things, like I want to now.'

'But, memsahib, the sahib will be very angry. He might beat us if you are not safe. Please memsahib, let me take you to the station. I will take you in the daytime. It is night and it is dangerous. Gita said I am to take care of you. She will be very angry too.'

Carrie sighed, realising her request of Radhav was too great. She was already concerned that Arnold would take her mistake at the Military Ball in front of Lady Mabel out on Gita, and if Radhav went against him too she wouldn't put it past Arnold to dismiss them both. She knew first-hand what that would do to them.

'No, no, of course. You must take me to Trimulgherry. I want to see my son. Take me back, Radhav.'

Radhav sighed with relief. 'Thank you, memsahib. Thank you.'



GITA WAS WAITING ON the steps to the bungalow.

'You are home early, memsahib. Carrie.'

Carrie dismounted from the cart and nodded. 'Yes, Gita. I'm back. How's John?'

'Sleeping soundly. He has not woken. Not once.'

Carrie smiled a humourless smile. 'No, well, he's a good boy.' She ran lightly up the three steps to the veranda, went into the sitting room and began to pace, her fingers linked tightly in front of her.

'Carrie?' Gita said in almost a whisper. 'Are you tired?'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, Gita, I'm not tired, but I need to tell you something.' She proceeded to tell Gita what had happened at the Secunderabad Club. Gita bowed her head as she spoke then turned away, a hand rubbing her forehead. When she turned back Carrie could see she looked exhausted.

'I'm so sorry, Madam,' she said. 'I am to blame.'

'You are not to blame. You were trying to help me, and clearly I didn't understand. I shouldn't have said anything, I just couldn't think of anything else to say. They all know each other. They all know what to talk about, but they talk about the same things all the time, the weather, the last badminton match, whatever that is. I suppose I could have spoken about John but Arnold wouldn't have been pleased.' She threw herself into a chair. 'Oh, I don't know. I keep getting things wrong.'

'Carrie, you must be yourself. Perhaps...perhaps you should do the things you want to do. Without the sahib's permission.'

Carrie glanced up at her and smiled. 'You think I should. You think I should go against his wishes?'

Gita knelt in front of Carrie and reached for her hand, leaning her head to one side. 'Not...go against his wishes, but, maybe to make up your own mind. Like Mrs. Tremaine.'

'You know Dorothy?'

Gita nodded. 'When she was a child. She came here with her parents to visit Lady Mabel Dimmock, but Dimmock was not her name then. She had not yet married the Field Marshall.'

Carrie frowned. 'So what was she doing here?'

'Like many of the young women who come to India, Carrie. To find a husband.'

Carrie's eyes widened. 'She was part of the fishing fleet.'

'Yes, that is what I've heard them called.'

Carrie began to laugh. She stood and began dancing around the sitting room still laughing. 'I'm so happy. It's really daft, but I'm so happy. That one little thing has changed everything. She's so...toffee-nosed, so...bloody snotty. She looks at me like I'm a piece of rotting fish under her big, ugly nose.' She grabbed Gita's hands, pulling her from the floor. 'Thank you, Gita. Thank you for being such a good friend.' She put her arm around the sparrow-like shoulders of the slender Indian woman. 'I'll never let anything happen to you, or your husband and daughter. Do you understand? While I am here you'll always have a job, I promise. I would fight Arnold for it if I had to. For some reason I don't feel scared anymore. And you're right, I need to make up my own mind and do the things I want to do. With or without Arnold's permission. This is the new beginning. Tomorrow is the day I take control of my own life.'



Chapter 19

Carrie woke with a headache. Her skin was clammy and even though it was the early hours it was even hotter than usual. She lay staring out into the darkness of the bedroom, the shapes of the sparse furniture making dark smudges against the walls. A rumble of thunder from far off echoed the mugginess of the bungalow. There was a storm approaching and she thought about what she'd heard of the monsoon season. It was late July and Gita and Aashi had talked about the great rains, the "*maanason*". They said that Secunderabad and Hyderabad did not fare as badly as Bombay or Kerala where the rains washed away the mud streets and disrupted the markets and pulled down the roofs of some of the shanty buildings. Even the larger buildings in Bombay were not left unscathed. It changed the lives of people living in those places and yet the natives were used to it, some even looked forward to it because it broke up the parched air and dampened down the constant dust. As soon as the first large drops of rain fell, children ran out into the street, their arms aloft as if to greet the great rains, and splashed about in the water, having fun and crying out with joy as if it was a holiday.

She found the distant rumble almost comforting. It reminded her of when she was child playing in the streets of Whitechapel in the hot summer months when suddenly the skies would grow darker and darker and a heavy rain would fall accompanied by great rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightening. She would run into Florrie giggling with a delicious fear, and Florrie would yank the metal hair slides out of hair, worried that her daughter would be struck by lightning. Carrie often wondered that she had any hair left, she would pull so hard, but she was sure it was done out of love and misplaced superstition. Florrie seemed to live her whole life by superstition and tradition.

A flare from a fork of lightning lit up the room and she heard John stir in the other room. Carrie got out of bed and went into his room, pushing the net aside from the cot, and ran her hand across his dark hair which was damp with sweat.

'Oh, John,' she whispered. She took a muslin from a drawer and gently wiped his face, then his arms and legs, dabbing away the moisture that had settled in droplets on his skin. He stirred and opened his eyes, staring into the darkness without recognition. His eyelashes fluttered and closed again and she smiled her relief, then opened the door to the bedroom and went out into the corridor. It was cooler out there and she took a deep breath, but her throat was

parched with the dryness in the air so went into the kitchen for water. Gita had left a jug on the stone floor in the kitchen covered with a cloth. She poured some water from the jug into a cup and as she turned was startled when she saw Arnold sitting at the kitchen table, a bottle of whiskey and a glass by his hand. In the darkness she hadn't noticed he wasn't beside her in their bed.

'Arnold. You scared me.'

'Did I?'

'What are you doing out here?'

'I couldn't sleep.' He looked up at her. 'There's a storm coming. It'll probably wake the boy.'

She bristled. Could he still not bring himself to say her son's name? 'The boy? You mean John.' He nodded and she gritted her teeth. 'And you're drinking whiskey, at this time. It must be, what,' she glanced at the kitchen clock, 'three o'clock in the morning? Why are you drinking alcohol at this time of the morning?'

He slugged the remainder of the whiskey down his throat and refilled his glass. 'Why do you ask so many questions? It's none of your business what I do.'

She sighed and made to leave the kitchen but he stopped her. 'Wait, for God's sake. Wait. You've got to try harder. You've got to make more of an impression. Some of the other women have befriended Lady Mabel and they've been invited to a charity open day they're holding to raise money to send food parcels to the front in France. Unfortunately, because of your performance the other night at the Secunderabad Club we haven't been invited.' He slammed the glass down on the table spilling some of the contents onto his hand and across the table where it dribbled onto the floor. 'It just won't do, Carrie. You must make more of an effort. We're getting left behind.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. My performance? All I said was that Gita had invited me to help her with Aashi's wedding. It sounds like a wonderful thing to do, and I'm one of the best people to do it with my experience at Nightingale Lane, yet it seems I said the wrong thing and I don't understand why.'

'Exactly. You don't understand why. That's the problem with you, you're not learning anything. You're not accepting what we have to do here to get on.'

'But I don't want to get on. What I want is to go home where I know everyone and everyone is like me. These people aren't my people, Arnold, and they're not your people either, but you won't admit it. Even Dorothy said you're determined to haul yourself up in society by your bootstraps.' Arnold blanched and his mouth was a straight line. 'And she's right isn't she? Where we come from isn't good enough for you anymore. You're trying to be something you're

not.'

He narrowed his eyes at her and bared his teeth. 'And how would you know what I am...what I'm capable of? And you can tell high and mighty Dorothy Tremaine to mind her own fucking business. It's got nothing to do with her either. It's alright for people like her, they were born into it, the money and the position. I have to work harder for it, and you...,' he flung his arm out and pointed at her, 'you won't stop me.'

Carrie stared at him for a moment, then realising Arnold was drunk and beyond reason went into John's bedroom and closed the door. She gathered some blankets from a chest in the corner and made a bed on the floor next to his cot. A huge clap of thunder shook her and took her breath away. It was so violent it sounded as though it was right overhead. The rain began to fall in rods, striking the roof of the bungalow like the beat of an out of time drum. A wind got up and rattled the shutters and John began to fidget in his sleep, the clamminess and the unfamiliar noise of the thunder and lightning gradually waking him. Carrie took him to her breast and fed him. The comfort this gave him sent him back into a restless sleep and she was glad she had continued to feed him herself without Arnold's knowledge. He had told her a wet-nurse had been appointed to feed him but unknown to Arnold, Carrie had sent her away telling her there had been a mistake and she wasn't needed. Gita had nodded her approval and smiled warmly at Carrie when the young woman retraced her steps off the veranda. Carrie had worried then, that when Arnold found out he would be angry, but he was so bound up in his military duties and his quest to infiltrate himself into the upper echelons of the society of the station he hadn't noticed, and Carrie had breathed a sigh of relief, choosing to feed John in isolation, her absence from Arnold a welcome respite for her.

The next morning the sun rose again and quickly dried up the puddles that had been left by the downpour.

'Just a shower,' said Gita. 'Everything will be dry again in minutes. The sun will be fierce. Wear your topi if you go out, Carrie, and make sure John is in the shade. The hot sun follows a storm. It is just the way it is.'

'I've had another letter from Pearl. I'm going to read it first, then perhaps walk down to the pond in Trimulgherry. Would you like to come, Gita?'

'I...I would like it very much, Madam. Carrie. Yes, thank you. Read your letter first. I will make up a basket to take with us. We can shelter under the trees and you can eat.'

'And you, Gita. You will need to eat too.' Gita nodded, then lowered her face and smiled.



‘WE’RE GOING.’ ARNOLD came into the kitchen and slammed his cap down on the table in triumph, then went across to the cabinet and poured whiskey into a glass.

Carrie looked up from the letter she’d received from Pearl, her eyes glistening with tears. ‘Going where?’

Arnold didn’t notice her distress and walked around the room, expansive in his speech, deliriously happy. ‘To the charity open day. We’ve been invited, well, *I’ve* been invited, but obviously you will accompany me.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Right.’

‘Well come on, woman. Show some enthusiasm.’

‘William has been killed...in France.’

Arnold inhaled and nodded, then bowed his head. ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Pearl is devastated. I wish I could be with her. I should be with her.’

‘There’s nothing you can do. Many men have been killed. She will have to make another life.’

‘They were going to be married. They were engaged and she was planning their wedding. She wanted me to be her bridesmaid. She was so excited, so looking forward to her wedding day and being with William for the rest of her life. She thought they would have a lovely life together, him being a milkman an’ all, she knew he’d never be out of a job. They planned to have babies. She loved him, really loved him, and he loved her.’ Tears rolled unchecked down Carrie’s cheeks and Arnold glanced at her, looking uncomfortable. ‘She was going to have peonies.’

‘Crying won’t help.’

‘I know that, Arnold, but I miss her so much.’ She stared up at him, her face wet with tears as she pleaded with him. ‘Could I go home, just for a while, so I can be with her? She needs me, Arnold.’

He frowned. ‘Go home? This is your home and your place is beside me. I’m not without sympathy for her, but you’re my wife and you must stay and help me run our household.’ His eyes took on a hard look. ‘Here’s some money.’ He fished a wad of notes from his pocket and peeled some off the top. ‘Take Gita into Secunderabad, to James Street, and buy a dress. I think they’re called tea dresses, for sunny afternoons and high society teas. I want you to look the part. Gita will know even if you don’t, and make sure it reaches your ankles, not like that monstrosity Dorothy Tremaine wore to our drinks party. Marcus Tremaine must have been quaking with embarrassment. I mean, you

could actually see the beginning of her calves. And buy a hat with flowers on it to match the dress, and shoes in the same colour with buttons. There's enough money there, but make sure you bring me the change. You must look like everyone else if you're to fit in.' Carrie stared at the money in his hand. 'Well, take it.'

'When am I to go?'

'You can go this afternoon. It'll probably be busy it being a Saturday but the open day is tomorrow so you need to get something.'

'How should we get there?'

'I've organised a motor vehicle.' Carrie looked at him in surprise. 'Don't get used to it. This is important to me and we've got to put right their impression of us.'

'Which is?'

'I wouldn't ask that question if I were you.'



JAMES STREET WAS BUSY. Carrie was utterly devastated at Pearl's news about losing William but the sounds, smells and sights of the crowded street lifted her spirits and she was filled with a new determination to return to her birthplace. This was the life she was used to, the excited chatter as people walked by, carts and vehicles on the road, and children running in and out of the crowd. The paths were populated by soldiers, some with their wives on their arms, and young women dressed in beautiful pastel gauzy dresses that fluttered in the warm breeze making them look like skittish birds of paradise. The overall atmosphere was one of excitement and the shops were very busy.

Carrie was fascinated by the jewellery shops where the windows were full of gold and silver necklaces and rings adorned with *Basra* or rice pearls. There were bangles studded with coloured precious stones and bracelets made of stained glass, items that Carrie had never in her life seen before, and she felt as attracted to their sparkle and shine as the shoppers around her. The saree shops were full to bursting with girls purchasing lengths of exquisite fabric to be made into Western designs by a *durzi* or *Kuttedi*, a tailor or seamstress. There were shops selling handicrafts and paintings, silverware and pieces of unusual furniture. There was even a large open fronted store selling automobiles. Every need was catered for, and Carrie was surprised at how different it was from Bombay, but as she looked around her she noticed it wasn't the natives of India lavishly spending money. It was the Europeans keeping the shops open, the military men and their wives, the men and women of the Indian Civil Service, and the fishing fleet who were forever adorning themselves in order to catch a

husband. James Street was for the Raj.



TRIMULGHERRY WAS A world away from Whitechapel, and Carrie acknowledged she had struggled to become part of it. As she and Gita walked along the street she felt her face pull into a smile, something she hadn't done for what seemed like forever.

'Do you come here, Gita,' she asked the woman who moved silently beside her.

'No. This place is not for me. I buy from the locals in Trimulgherry. The *box-wallahs*. I think you know them, Madam. You have seen them. They bring things to the house. All kinds of things. I know them and they know me. We can talk of price. I can get the best price. This place is for people with money.' She looked up at Carrie and smiled. 'Like you today, Madam.'

'You know, Gita, I feel as though I'm being bought by Arnold. He thinks money solves every problem.'

'Do you believe that, Carrie?'

'No. No, I don't. I know from bitter experience money doesn't come into it. Life is about people, about what they do rather than what they say. I'm afraid I learnt that the hard way.'

'Yes, Madam. I agree. We have had so little money in our family, yet Radhav and I have raised four boys and two girls. We have always had just enough, just enough to eat, just enough money to see us through, just enough work.'

'And will you keep working, Gita? When will you stop? You can't work for ever. The work you do, I know how hard it is. I used to work in a big house before I came here. I was a maid. It can be exhausting, and I don't mean to rude to you, Gita,' she smiled, 'I'm a lot younger than you.'

Gita stared at her and shook her head in astonishment. 'No, memsahib. You could not have been a maid. You could not have been like me.'

Carrie turned to her and raised her eyebrows. 'Gita, I feel more at home with you and Aashi because I know hardship, I know difficulty. I'm not like Dorothy Tremain who for some reason has taken me under her wing. Of course, I'm very glad of it. Without her by my side at the social events I would be completely lost.'

'And your friend?'

Carrie lowered her chin and swallowed. 'You mean Pearl?' Gita nodded. 'Oh, Gita, I can't tell you how sad I am, but what can I do. When we arrived at the railway station in Secunderabad I promised myself and John that one day I would get back on that train and go

back to England. It's all I want, to go back to everything and everyone I know. This...this is all wrong. This is not how my life was meant to be. I shouldn't be here. I should be in London, in Whitechapel with Pearl, comforting her, holding her tight and promising her I won't leave her side. I know I can't bring William back but...I could have cared for her.' Gita nodded. 'All I can do is write to her. The letter will take weeks to get to her and be of no use whatsoever. Arnold has refused to let me go to her.'

'I'm sorry, Madam. So sorry, Carrie.'

They stopped outside a shop selling fine fabric and dresses and looked through the window into the darkness inside.

'What do you think, Gita?'

'We should go into the shop.'

Carrie looked through the dresses hanging on rails and frowned. 'They're a bit old-fashioned,' she whispered. 'These dresses are the sort my mum would wear. I don't think they're right for me.' She glanced up and saw the shop owner watching her, and she smiled. 'Do you have anything for the younger woman?'

He came towards her, a small man with an abundance of black hair and piercing eyes, rubbing his hands together. 'This range is for the beautiful young English woman, Madam, like you. They have been sent from London.'

Carrie looked at Gita and pulled a face. 'Yeah, when?' she said under her breath. 'In the last century?'

Gita put her hand over her mouth and giggled. 'Carrie. He will hear you.'

'Good. These are awful. What am I going to do?'

They left the dress shop with the proprietor following closely behind, wringing his hands and almost begging them to stay in the shop. They walked quickly to get away from him, running through the crowd, doing their best to dodge the other shoppers. Carrie was in front and as she turned to see where Gita was, she bumped into someone. She turned to see a man sprawled on the ground, his face a mixture of recognition and surprise.

David Lawrence, Arnold's Captain got to his feet and brushed himself off as Carrie apologised over and over again.

'Captain Lawrence. Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry, sir. Are you alright? Are you hurt?'

He straightened up and grinned at her. 'You're stronger than you look, Mrs. Bateman.'

'I'm so sorry, sir. I...we were trying to escape from a shopkeeper who wanted me to buy one of his horrible dresses. I'm surprised he hasn't chased us down the street.'

'Yes, some of them can be very persuasive in trying to get us to

part with our money. Out clothes shopping, are you?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, for tomorrow. For the open day.’

‘It’s a good cause. Mabel Dimmock knows how to encourage people. She could give some of these shopkeepers a run for their money, that’s for sure.’

He looked at her and smiled and Carrie felt her stomach turn over. He was very good-looking; dark-haired with hazel eyes that roamed her face. The fierce sun in India had turned his skin olive brown and she felt her breath falter, cursing the blush she knew was creeping up her neck and onto her face.

‘Well, um, I hope you’re alright.’

‘Yes. Yes, I’m fine.’ She nodded. ‘That’s good.’ She glanced at Gita who lowered her eyes.

‘If you’re looking for dresses I’ve heard the best one on James Street is Zaina’s. It’s near the monument at the far end, you know, the clock tower? I think it’s where the other ladies go.’

She laughed. ‘Thank you, sir. I’ll go now. It can’t be any worse than what we’ve just seen.’

He frowned slightly and momentarily put his hand on her arm. She felt her skin tingle under his touch. ‘David, please. Not sir. My name is David.’

‘Thank you, David. And I’m Carrie.’

‘Yes, I know. Caroline Violet Elizabeth, if I’m not mistaken.’

Her mouth dropped open. ‘How did you...’

‘Dorothy. She said it was a beautiful name...and I agree.’

Carrie felt herself go even redder. ‘Oh, well, thank you...David. It was my grandmother’s name.’

He bowed slightly. ‘You wear it very well.’

‘Will...will you be at the open day tomorrow?’ she asked, trying to appear as though it didn’t really matter that he’d just said her name was beautiful.

‘I hope so. I’ve been asked to lead an expedition into the hills but I’m thinking it’ll begin on Monday rather than on our Holy Day, even though most of those at Trimulgherry are in and out of church as soon as they possibly can be without raising eyebrows. I’m sure they only go because they’re worried if they don’t they’ll be thought of as heathen. I pity Father Clarke. His congregation shrinks by the week. He must wonder why he’s here.’

‘Do you go? To church I mean.’

‘Yes, although I’m not particularly religious, and after some of the sights I had to confront in France I do wonder about our all-seeing God, but, yes, I go, if only to set a good example.’ Carrie nodded and smiled and he lifted his cap to her. ‘I must be on my way, Carrie. Good luck with your shopping expedition. Do try Zaina’s. I’m sure

they'll be able to help you there. I'll see you at the open day hopefully.'

She smiled, wondering if he meant he would hopefully be there, or he would hopefully see her. 'Goodbye, David.' She watched him walk away. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a confident gait, and as he made his way towards his car, his hands casually pushed into his pockets, she saw some of the women glance at him appreciatively then at each other, and raise their eyebrows as he passed. That he was an attractive man there was no doubt and she thought about how she'd felt when he spoke to her. She remembered those feelings. They were the ones she'd had when she'd spent time with Johan and she shivered.

'Are you alright, Carrie?' Gita asked her.

Carrie smiled. 'Yes, yes, come on, Gita. Let's get this over and done with. We'll go to Zaina's as David suggested, then we'll have coffee in that little restaurant over there.'

Gita visibly blanched. 'No, Carrie. Not a restaurant. I would not be allowed.'

Carrie stared at her in astonishment. 'Of course you're allowed. We're together. Our money is as good as anyone else's.' Gita still looked doubtful and Carrie put her arm around her shoulders. 'If it makes you feel better we'll sit at one of the tables outside.'

'Yes, yes it would, Madam.'

'Then it's decided.'

Carrie stepped over the threshold of Zaina's and gasped. The dresses were a world away from what she'd previously seen and she felt excited. Gita's face had lit up too and they both wasted no time in looking through the dresses on the rails.

'What d'you think, Gita? Which colour should I go for?'

After a few minutes searching Gita pulled out a dress and held it up. It was pale blue, with tiny white daisies all over the fabric. The sleeves were puffed and decorated around the trim which ended at the elbow with a small bow. The waist was cinched in to give a lovely shape and the skirt billowed beautifully, the perfect tea dress. 'I love this one. It is very beautiful. The colour will look very well on you.'

Carrie touched the soft fabric of the dress and imagined herself wearing it. It was everything Arnold had said it should be, but it was also very stylish and rather feminine. In her mind's eye she saw herself wearing the dress with matching pale blue shoes and bag, walking into the charity open day on David Lawrence's arm. Her heart fluttered and she inhaled a steadying breath. There was something about him that attracted her. It wasn't just the way he looked, but rather he had an air about him of tenderness, perhaps even kindness, and in a man who had been so brave in the face of battle,

those gentle attributes were very appealing.

‘Yes, Gita. I think that might be the one. Well done. You’re very clever.’ She took the dress from Gita and grinned. ‘Shall I try it on?’

Gita nodded. ‘Yes, Madam, and I will find some shoes and a bag. I know what to look for.’

Carrie put a hand on her arm. ‘I know you do, Gita. What would I do without you?’

Gita look pleased, then hurried off to the racks and racks of shoes and shelves of bags. An attractive Indian woman came out of a small office. She was dressed in a bright orange sari edged with gold. Every finger on her hands sported a gold ring and her ears were pierced and decorated with long gold earrings. When she saw Gita looking at the shoes she frowned and looked cross.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked Gita who turned quickly looking guilty.

Carrie came out of the dressing room. ‘Gita is with me,’ she said. ‘She’s helping me choose an outfit.’

Her demeanour changed instantly. ‘Oh, madam. I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you were together.’ She clapped her hands and a girl came out of the office holding a tray with a glass of iced tea and some tiny, spiced crackers. ‘Please accept this while you look. It’s very hot today and this is perfect for cooling.’

Carrie nodded her thanks. ‘I’m sure Gita would appreciate some too. It looks delicious.’

The woman stared at Carrie and the girl frowned. ‘Miss Zaina?’

‘Er, yes, of course,’ Zaina said. She turned to the girl. ‘Another glass please, Varsha.’ Gita was frozen to the spot, aware that Zaina was uncomfortable with her being offered refreshment. She was, after all, a servant, but this fact didn’t seem to bother Carrie. ‘Have you found something you like, madam?’

‘Gita found this beautiful dress for me to try on.’ She indicated the pale blue dress hanging on the curtain rail. ‘And she’s looking for some shoes to match, oh, and a bag. She has a very good eye for colour.’

Zaina eyed Gita with disdain and ignored Carrie’s praise. ‘Would you like me to find some shoes for you, Madam.’

Carrie looked at her in surprise. ‘I think Gita is doing very well. Are you Zaina?’

‘Yes, madam. And this is my shop.’

Carrie smiled. ‘I can see why it’s so popular. Your clothes are beautiful.’

Zaina glowed. ‘Thank you. I do my best. Unfortunately it won’t be for very much longer.’

‘Oh, that’s a shame. Why’s that?’

‘I came here to set up business ten years ago because I knew it would be a good place. We have many Europeans here now, the military, the Indian Civil Service, and the judiciary. Their wives all buy from me and there always seems to be something going on, a ball, a dinner party, official meetings they must attend. I have seen it all, madam, but my parents in Bombay are old. My mother is particularly frail and I must go to them. My father is unable to look after her by himself. It is my duty to take care of them.’

‘I see. What about the shop? Who will look after it?’

‘The shop will close, madam. It will be the end of Zaina’s.’



AN HOUR LATER, CARRIE and Gita left the shop carrying three bags in Zaina’s signature colours of orange and gold. In the largest was the pale blue dress with daisies and the matching clutch bag, the smallest held the shoes, and in the middle-sized bag was a straw hat, trimmed with cornflowers and daisies, the perfect accompaniment to round off the outfit perfect for a summer’s day.

‘Are you happy, Carrie?’ asked Gita.

‘I think what we’ve chosen is perfect. Thank you for your help, Gita. It’s so lovely to have a companion. I don’t feel lonely anymore. I wish you could come with me tomorrow.’

Gita threw her head back and laughed. ‘That would never be allowed.’

‘No, and I’m sorry. It’s so silly all this dividing people up into boxes. You have been more of a friend to me than anyone since I left London.’

Gita smiled sadly. ‘But, Madam. The difference is you have been willing to accept the friendship offered by an Indian woman. No one else would.’

Carrie linked her arm through Gita’s. ‘Then it’s their loss. They don’t know what they’re missing.’



Chapter 20

Carrie waved to Gita as she ran up the steps at the front of the bungalow, then stopped when she realised the shutters had been closed. 'I know I opened them,' she said under her breath as she tried the veranda door which was also closed. As she pushed the door rattled slightly which meant it had probably been locked from the outside.

Gita began to retrace her steps when she realised Carrie had been locked out of the bungalow, and she joined her on the veranda.

'Carrie,' she said, sotto voce, her brow knitted with doubt. 'Do you not always open your shutters, Madam?' she asked. 'It's the only way to allow the early morning air to refresh your rooms. It will be very stuffy in the house.'

'Yes, Gita, you know I do. I thought Arnold was working on his papers at home today.' She shook her head. 'Perhaps I got it wrong. Maybe it's tomorrow.'

'And Amrita? Where is she?' Gita asked Carrie as she fumbled in her pocket for the bungalow key.

'She has taken John to her mother's house in Bowenpally. Her mother has had another baby and she thought it would be nice for John to spend time there with the other children. She has three small ones, the new baby and two more under five.'

Gita nodded. 'Yes, it is good for him to mix with other children.' She put her hand on Carrie's arm. 'There will be more children in your society soon, Carrie. John will have many friends.'

'I'm not sure, Gita. There doesn't seem to be much sign of anyone wanting to begin a family here. They're all having too much of a good time. Anyway, thank goodness you were here. I left my key inside. I didn't think I'd need it.'

Gita smiled. 'Today was very good, yes?'

Carrie returned her smile warmly. 'Today was very good.'

She let herself into the bungalow. The screen had also been locked, the first time it had ever been because it was not needed before, and inside the air was fuggy with cigarette smoke and the sourness of alcohol. There was hardly any light coming through the slats in the shutters, giving the room a gloomy feel. Carrie left her carrier bags from Zaina's on the sofa and narrowed her eyes to focus. On the desk were Arnold's papers, his pen thrown carelessly on the floor, the ink spilling from the nib and staining the rush matting. She bent to pick it up and used a wad of blotting paper to soak up the wayward ink. So

he had been working here today, she thought. I was right after all.

She removed her topi and laid it next to the bags, shaking out her hair from the pins that had anchored it into a tight chignon, then decided to change her clothes. It was mid-afternoon, not quite time for Gita to return to prepare dinner and it seemed hotter than ever. She opened the shutters then went into the corridor which separated the living quarters from the bedrooms, glancing into John's bedroom and smiling indulgently at the brightly coloured soft toys in his cot that Gita had brought him from her house, the ones she had given her own children. She turned towards her bedroom, startled to see the door was also shut. They usually left all the doors open so that any cool air would freshen the rooms. She shook her head thinking she must have closed it before she left. Placing her fingers on the handle, she pushed down and opened the door.



Chapter 21

‘The thing is, darling, they want to shut India out.’ Dorothy sipped her iced tea then indicated to her maid to refill her glass. ‘Another, Carrie?’ Carrie shook her head and Dorothy continued her diatribe. ‘They’re afraid of losing face in front of each other. We...the woman of the raj are making it worse. Some of us have accepted this is not our country; that we are as much guests here as anything else, even though some people here would have us think differently, and have embraced a different way of life, a different culture. We were brought here to do a job. But others, like Mabel Dimmock, and those stupid girls who came to India on the ship with us feel they are in some way better than the natives of India. The men just get on with it because they have to, but it’s the Mabel Dimmocks amongst us who perpetuate that we’re somehow a higher race, a better breed, and should be treated with deference.’

‘Even in their own country? It seems so wrong.’

‘Yes, even in their own country. So don’t be drawn into it. Find your comforts where you can, Carrie. If you have found friendship with Gita and her family then so be it.’

‘I don’t know how I would manage without her...and you of course, Dorothy. I want to help her with her daughter’s wedding. It would be so wonderful to do something different, and would give me a purpose. It’s not like I don’t have any experience. I try to spend as much time with John as I can, but Amrita, the ayah is so good with him and he has really taken to her. She and her family are so kind. Her mother sends little treats back for John and Amrita is like his big sister. I trust her much more than I thought I would.’

‘And Arnold?’

Carrie half closed her eyes and looked down. Nausea rushed into her throat and she swallowed hard not wanting to embarrass herself in front of Dorothy. Arnold had punched her in the face once, knocking her to the ground and rendering her unconscious, and had bullied her relentlessly since she had met him, but the burden she now carried was far worse than any of the pain she had suffered, or her constant fear of him.

‘I have discovered things about him, Dorothy. Things I don’t understand.’

Dorothy frowned and waved her maid away into the kitchen. ‘What things?’

Carrie shook her head. ‘I can’t tell you,’ she whispered. ‘Anyway, I

need to go back to my bungalow. It'll be time for dinner soon and he'll be wondering where I am. And I'm desperate to see John.'

Dorothy put a hand on her arm and her eyes widened. 'Why can't you tell me? What could be so terrible, Carrie?' She tried a smile but when Carrie didn't return it, it fell from her face. 'Is that why you came here this afternoon? To talk to me? Then you must, Carrie, if something is worrying you, you mustn't keep it to yourself. It must be bad if you feel you can't say it.'

'I just needed to get away for a while.'

She stared at Carrie and her face hardened. 'Is it something to do with when you lay together? Has he been rough with you? Has he hurt you? You don't have to put up with it you know.'

Carrie swallowed hard, her embarrassment talking about such things making her face redden. 'We...don't.'

'You don't what?'

'We don't...you know, in the bedroom.'

'So...it happens elsewhere? It's not so unusual. Marcus and I sometimes... How often?'

'Never.'

Dorothy stared at her, her mouth curved into a disbelieving smile. 'Never?' she cried. Carrie shook her head and Dorothy got up and began to pace the room, absent-mindedly straightening ornaments and plumping cushions on the many chaises in her sumptuous, highly adorned bungalow whilst still hanging on to her glass. 'So he must have a mistress, Carrie. I've not met a soldier yet who doesn't enjoy that kind of thing. I think it goes with the territory, letting off steam and all that, but...he's married. And you haven't been married long. One would have thought his looking for a mistress would be years away. Surely you want to add to your family before any of that goes on.'

'Does Marcus then?'

'Well, no. No, he doesn't. I can't imagine him ever doing something like that. We're so very close. And that side of things is, well, perfectly wonderful.' Carrie nodded, unsurprised that Dorothy's husband was faithful to her. 'This mistress. Do you know who she is?'

Carrie bit her lip and inhaled. She knew whatever she told Dorothy could not be taken back, but she trusted her, and the need to tell someone was far greater than the fear of speaking out.

'It's not a, she,' she whispered, shaking her head. 'It's a, he.'

Dorothy covered her face with her hands then sat and threw 'Oh, darling, you poor sweet girl. I'm so sorry.' Dorothy released her then stood again and walked across to the window deep in thought. She turned and was filled with pity at Carrie's look of defeat and the tears running down her cheeks. She knelt in front of her, covering Carrie's

hands that were in a tight knot in her lap, with her own. 'How did you find out?'

'Gita and I went to James Street. Arnold gave me some money to buy a dress for the charity open day. We weren't as long as I thought we'd be. John went to Amrita's family home to visit with her mother's children. I thought it would be good for him so I let him go and I was eager to find out how he'd got on. When we drove into the station I noticed the blinds were down in all the windows of the bungalow, and the shutters pulled together and I couldn't understand why. I definitely raised them this morning. I always do it. It's my routine. I open the blinds to throw back the shutters and let in the cooler morning air. I sent Gita home for an hour or two before she was due back to prepare dinner. Her husband has been under the weather and I knew she wanted to make sure he was alright.

'When I tried the front screen it was locked. Arnold said he'd be working at the bungalow that day, paperwork, you know the kind of thing. I just assumed he'd gone out for a while and had locked up. Gita gave me her key because I'd left mine in the house. I unlocked the door and went inside. I decided to change into something lighter so went into the bedroom.' She pursed her lips and puffed out a breath as tears rolled down her cheeks, then breathed in again, a breath that shook with distress.

Dorothy squeezed her hands. Take your time, darling. Take your time.'

'Arnold was in bed...with a young blond man, a boy really, not more than twenty. I recognised him as someone in his unit who I'd met in the market in Bombay. Arnold had left the hotel saying he was meeting the men in his unit, thinking I wouldn't be able to follow him because I didn't have a pram, but the manager gave me one and I saw them both in the main street.'

'What did he do?' Dorothy said in a voice more like a whisper.

'He must have heard the door open because he sat up and just looked at me for what seemed forever. I...I suppose I stared at them because it felt like I was in a dream, a nightmare. Arnold had never approached me in the bedroom, and to be honest I was pleased because I didn't want to know him like that, and I didn't want him to know me either. I was so scared he'd want us to have a child together and I couldn't imagine how I would feel about it.' She shook her head. 'I don't love him, Dorothy. I never have. And it's not because of what's happened. He's just...unpleasant, bullying. He isn't a nice man. You know that don't you? How could any woman love a man like him?'

Dorothy got up and sat next to her on the rattan sofa. 'I must admit when I first met you I was surprised. You were far too young and pretty to waste yourself on a man like Arnold Bateman, and in all

honesty I've never liked him. He's the kind of man we in the suffrage movement despair of most. He clearly dislikes women.' She glanced down at Carrie. 'You deserve so much better, you know. So much better.'

'He's my husband. I married him for better or for worse.'

Dorothy snorted. 'Oh, come on, that's taking things a bit far. When you made those vows you had no idea what kind of man he was. Don't get me wrong, Carrie, I'm not judging him, but he should never have married you, never have made you think you would have a normal marriage with him. What are you going to do about it? You can't want to stay married to him, surely.'

Carrie sighed. 'I'm not sure. I've moved out of the bedroom. Gita helped me take the single bed from the guest room into John's room. I could see Arnold wasn't happy about it because I'm sure he thinks if anyone finds out it'll look strange, but he didn't say anything.'

'No, I bet he didn't.' Dorothy clutched her hands wanting Carrie to make the right decision. 'You don't have to stay married to him, not now, not now you know who he really is. Perhaps I should speak to Marcus and ask him what you can do to put an end to this charade.'

Carrie looked aghast. 'Please don't. I'll deal with it, I promise. Please let's just keep it between you and me. Please, Dorothy. For now. Until I decide what must be done.'

Dorothy nodded, then leaned forward and kissed Carrie on the forehead. 'Yes, yes, okay. But Carrie you can't push this under the carpet. You're young and you deserve a better life than this. You don't have to accept it. You have to believe that.'

She stared at Carrie for a long moment with sad eyes, and Carrie leant forward resting her head on her knees, and wept.

The following day, the day of Mabel's charity affair, dawned overcast and humid. As Carrie lifted the blinds and opened the shutters she stared up into a heavy grey sky, her thoughts going to her new straw hat trimmed with daisies and cornflowers, and what would happen to it if it rained. She had been thinking about anything rather than the image of Arnold and the young man in their bed. It was beyond her understanding, far away from anything she had experienced before. She hadn't known such things happened between men, but now it was something she had been forced to face. Then her thoughts quickly went to David Lawrence and her heart leapt. Since meeting him the day before she couldn't get him out of her mind. There was something about him, the respectful way he spoke to her, his gentle demeanour that reminded her of Johan. She bent her head and could hear Pearl's voice admonishing her, saying, 'Yes, Carrie. And look how *he* treated you.' But Carrie felt instinctively that David Lawrence wasn't like Johan. David was older, more considered, and

clearly made his own decisions without any family pressure. He was also Arnold Bateman's commanding officer.

Arnold came into the sitting room, fastening his cuffs, then reaching for his jacket laying on the chair.

'I'll have to meet you at the showground this afternoon. I've been asked to attend a conference with the boss about a trip he wants me and some of the unit to make into mountains. Apparently there are some insurgents causing trouble in one of the townships and we need to put a stop to it before it gets any worse.'

Carrie stared at him, waiting for him to say something, anything, about what had occurred the day before when she returned from her shopping trip with Gita. He seemed not to have any shame or explanation about her finding him in bed...their bed, with his lover, and yet she knew if she had been discovered in the same circumstances he would have turned his rage on her and beaten her, and made sure everyone knew about it. I must say something, she thought, or I'll never be able to face my reflection again.

'Why haven't you spoken to me about yesterday, Arnold? Do you think I'm just going to accept that you took someone else, a man, to our bed?'

'He raised his eyebrows and inhaled his impatience. 'It's none of your business.'

She pulled a face, then thought better of it when she saw his expression. 'Not my business. I'm your wife.'

'In name only. I've given you my name and I paid your mother handsomely for the privilege. And that's all it is, Carrie Dobbs, a lending of a name, an agreement for services rendered. You're hardly the catch of the century.'

'You lent me your name? We were married in church. You made vows, we both did, but they didn't include you getting into our bed with a man.' The slap knocked her sideways but she managed to remain standing. She put the palm of her hand to her face and held it against her cheek to relieve the pain. 'That's your answer for everything, isn't it, Arnold. A punch, a slap. You have no right to treat me like this. You mother wouldn't approve. She told me what sort of man your father was and how you've taken after him.'

'Oh, really? She stayed with him though, didn't she? And why was that?'

Carrie shrugged. 'How should I know?'

'Because she was in the same boat as you, pregnant with another man's child.' His lip curled with disgust. 'She got everything she deserved.'

'So he wasn't your father.'

'Oh, yes, he was. He made absolutely sure she didn't have the

other one. He didn't want to raise another man's child. Why the hell should we? You women, you disgust me. You're all willing to open your legs to anyone who'll have you.' He made a step towards Carrie and she shrunk back aware he wouldn't resist striking her again if he had a mind to. He raised his hand and pointed at her. 'Make sure you're at the showground this afternoon, and you say nothing about anything. Do you understand?' She didn't reply. 'Am I making myself clear,' he shouted just as Gita arrived to prepare lunch and clean the bungalow. Carrie nodded and he glanced at Gita with a sneer before he left the bungalow, slamming the screen behind him.

'Carrie?' Gita said, frowning with concern.

'It's alright, Gita. Don't worry.'

'He hit you again?' Carrie turned her flaming cheek to her. 'Come with me. I will put something on it to take away the pain.'

Carrie followed Gita into the kitchen, her heart heavy and her head pounding from a headache where Arnold's blow had shaken her skull.

'Will you go today, Carrie? Gita asked her. 'Will you still go?'

'I must. I don't know what he'll do if I don't.'

'But your face.'

Carrie turned to her. 'Can you do what we did before, with the cosmetics, to cover it up? I don't have any choice, Gita. I don't know what he'll do to me if I don't attend. I must pretend to be the wife that I'm expected to be, while Arnold pulls the wool over everyone's eyes and playacts at being a husband...and a man.'

The skies had cleared, and a hot sun blazed onto the showground. Carrie stood at the gate, the skirt of her pale blue dress skittering delicately in the light breeze. Across the field were groups of people, men and women talking to their friends, drinking chilled wine and eating the Indian specialities offered to them by Indian servants clothed in white trousers, knee-length coats with mandarin collars, and brightly coloured turbans with swathes of fabric hanging down their backs. Carrie was filled with apprehension. She knew none of Mabel Dimmock's guests; there wasn't one group of revellers she could join with any comfort. Most of them, particularly the women with whom she'd sailed to India, had given her the cold shoulder. Even those who had softened slightly towards her, nodding when they saw her around the entrenchment, a small smile here and there when they were feeling magnanimous, now ignored her after her faux pas at the Military Ceremonial Ball which had become fodder for the gossipmongers. She knew she had made matters worse by befriending the natives, something no one else at the station would think of doing. Even Dorothy, who was striding towards her across the field.

'Carrie,' she called, waving as she walked. 'You came.' Carrie

nodded and smiled, relieved to see her. 'You look stunning, darling. That dress, those shoes. They must be from Zaina's.'

'They are. But she won't have a shop for much longer. She's going back to Bombay to care for her parents.'

Dorothy looked horrified. 'Oh, good heavens. She has the best dress shop in Secunderabad. None of the others come close.'

'Don't I know it? I must have gone in all of them until I met David Lawrence and he told me the best place to go.'

'David?'

'He was on James Street. I bumped into him. Literally. Knocked him right over. I thought I'd killed him.'

Dorothy threw her head back and laughed. 'I don't think it's the only way you've knocked him over, darling, from what he tells me.'

Carrie felt herself go hot. 'What do you mean?'

'Oh, nothing. Don't take any notice of me.' She linked her arm through Carrie's and began to walk her towards a marquee where an auction was going to be held, and where everyone was standing outside mingling, waiting to be called inside.

'Now what about that other thing?'

'What other thing?' asked Carrie, knowing full well what Dorothy meant. Dorothy raised her eyebrows and pressed her lips together. Carrie shrugged and sighed. 'He didn't say anything, and when I brought the subject up, he did this.' She turned her right cheek towards Dorothy. 'So I've worked out the best thing to do is to say nothing.'

'But that can't continue, surely. So...he hit you because you questioned him about his lover. That's preposterous.'

'If I knew what that word meant I'd probably agree with you. He said it's none of my business, that he only leant his name to me to give me a name for my son and that I'm to do as I'm told and to say nothing about anything. That's my place, Dorothy, and I guess it's exactly where I am.' Dorothy shook her head and inhaled a long breath. 'All the time he's paying for me, like these clothes for instance, Arnold thinks he owns me. He paid my mother and now he's paying me. That's how he sees it, I know it. It's a business transaction. I'm just something to be bought and sold.'

'So do something about it, Carrie. Buy your own clothes.'

'With what? I have nothing, Dorothy. I don't think you understand. I came to India with nothing and I'll no doubt leave the same way, whenever that's going to be. It can't come fast enough as far as I'm concerned.'



THE MARQUEE WAS PACKED to the edges. Carrie stood with Dorothy at the back, clutching a glass of soda and wondering when Arnold would put in an appearance. It occurred to her he may have lied to her about where he was going. It was possible, she thought, that he was meeting the young man she found him with in their bed. Their bed. He'd insisted she sleep with him even though she hadn't wanted to, and she acknowledged what a hypocrite he was. Appearances. It was all he cared about. He was terrified that Gita and Amrita and Aashi, and the tea wallah and punka wallah would all know what was going on. Perhaps they knew anyway. Maybe they had known even before her. But it was far too late for him to be worrying about what anyone thought, and in any case he was arrogant and probably didn't care. He knew none of the servants would say anything because of the fear of losing their jobs. It was a fear he constantly held over their heads. She had heard him threatening the tea wallah with dismissal one evening because his tea was too milky, and complaining to Gita that her husband had let him down again even though Arnold knew he had been unwell. She closed her eyes when she thought of him and wondered how she would ever get herself out of his clutches.



THE AUCTION WENT WITHOUT hitch. David Lawrence had offered to take someone out for afternoon tea to the highest bidder, and Dorothy had nudged Carrie, saying, 'Go on, darling. Make a bid. He'd love it if you won.' Carrie had smiled and shaken her head, but she'd been pleased that Dorothy thought David admired her. Mabel Dimmock made absolutely sure she won the opportunity to go out for afternoon tea with him, and Dorothy was in peals of laughter, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief when she saw the expression on David's face.

'Oh, brilliant. How wonderful. Look at David. He's positively appalled.'

'Shush, Dorothy. She'll hear you.'

'Good. I hope she does, silly old woman.'

'She's not that old.'

'Try telling that to David.' Dorothy squealed with laughter again.

Later, when they were outside the marquee and sitting in the sunshine, David Lawrence joined them. Dorothy looked up at him and burst out laughing again. She flung her arm over the back of her chair and grabbed one of his hands.

'That went well, darling. I don't think you were expecting that were you?'

He pulled a comical face. 'Well, she does have more money than

anyone else. I suppose it's a sacrifice I'll have to make. It is for charity after all.'

'How much did she bid,' asked Carrie.

He smiled down at her and nodded. 'It was a lot. And if it helps someone it's a small price to pay. For me, I mean.'

Both Carrie and Dorothy erupted again and David offered to buy them a drink. 'Ooh, champagne for me please,' said Dorothy.

'Carrie?' he asked. 'Would you like champagne? How about a champagne cocktail. They're very refreshing in all this damned heat.'

'I've never had one,' said Carrie.

'Then let this be the first time,' he said with a smile. 'Dorothy?'

'Lovely, darling.'

When he returned he carried a tray on which there were three champagne cocktails, topped with raspberries and ice. He handed one each to Carrie and Dorothy, then sat in a chair next to Carrie.

'Go ahead,' he said to her. 'Try it.'

Carrie sipped her drink and gasped. 'Ooh, that's lovely.'

Dorothy smiled warmly and David laughed. 'How sweet,' said Dorothy.

David raised his eyebrows and smiled at Carrie's naiveté. 'So what's your normal tippie, Mrs. Bateman?'

Carrie shook her head. 'We never have drink in the house. My dad likes to go to the pub for a pint of ale, but the strongest drink we have at home is tea you can stand your spoon up in.'

David and Dorothy threw their heads back and laughed. 'Oh, Carrie,' said Dorothy. 'You really are very funny. It's so lovely to see that side of you. Long may it continue.' She put her hand on Carrie's and patted it. 'Well done, darling.'

Carrie shrugged. 'I'm not really sure what you mean, but, thank you anyway.' Dorothy and David swapped warm glances and both looked at Carrie. 'I wonder where Arnold's got to,' she said.

Dorothy released a breath of impatience. 'Yes, quite.' She took a sip of her cocktail. 'Not sure why you care, darling.'

David frowned. 'Dorothy! That's not worthy of you.'

Dorothy suddenly looked cross. 'Isn't it? I speak as I find. You know me well enough to know it, David.'

'Yes, but why? I don't understand.'

'No, David, you don't. You really don't.' Carrie looked from one to the other, feeling uncomfortable and worried. She stared at Dorothy and Dorothy shrugged.

'Speak of the devil,' said David. 'Bateman,' he called, waving to him. 'Over here.'

Arnold spotted them and faltered when he saw who Carrie was sitting with, then walked towards them, nodding to his superior then

to Dorothy.

‘Captain Lawrence. Mrs. Tremaine.’

Dorothy lit a cigarette and got up. ‘Females first, Sergeant-Major. Bateman. You greet females first. It’s how society works. Don’t let Mabel Dimmock hear you get it wrong. She’ll send you back to the front.’ Arnold looked awkward and his face coloured as Dorothy bent and kissed Carrie on the cheek. ‘You know where I am, Carrie. Any time, day or night. We girls must stick together you know.’ She flashed a stony glance at Arnold and went back into the marquee where her husband was talking to a group of soldiers.

Carrie sat quietly with her head bowed, thinking she should have realised Dorothy wouldn’t let things rest. Now she and Gita knew about Arnold, and Carrie was sure Gita would have told Aashi, her daughter, and perhaps even her husband that Arnold had struck her on more than one occasion. She knew from bitter experience that when you let knowledge out into air it had a funny way of multiplying and becoming uncontrollable. She said a silent prayer that Dorothy wouldn’t say anything to David Lawrence. He was Arnold’s superior after all and Arnold could lose his position if what had been going on was made public knowledge. She dreaded to think what Arnold would do to her if that happened.

‘We should go and pay our respects to Lady Mabel, Carrie,’ he said. ‘And thank her for our invitation, particularly in the light of...’ He looked down, turning his cap in his hands, then glanced in Carrie’s direction.

David looked sideways, suddenly interested. ‘In the light of...what exactly?’

‘Well, sir. Carrie, that is, Mrs. Bateman didn’t understand the ways of the mofussil... that we don’t fraternise with the natives or the servants. She was asked to help with our housekeepers wedding...and she...well,’ he looked embarrassed, ‘sort of announced it in front of Lady Mabel as though it was something everyone does and that it would be deemed acceptable. I mean, we have to keep our distance from them, don’t we, sir? Or how will we keep control?’

David Lawrence nodded as though carefully considering what Arnold had said. He stood and lit a cigarette, cupping the flame with his hand, a gesture Carrie remembered from the first time she’d met him at the railway station in Bombay. He turned and looked at her, his mouth a straight line. He’s angry, she thought. He thinks less of me now. I’ve shown myself up for what I am. David dragged from his cigarette then released the vapour slowly into the air.

‘I think if Mrs. Bateman is willing to give her time to helping with a wedding, which let’s face it Bateman, isn’t an everyday occurrence, I think it should be encouraged.’ Arnolds face paled and he seemed to

stop breathing. 'After all, it is a creative endeavour is it not, and one thing we do expect from our ladies is that they are socially creative, is that not so, Bateman?' David smiled and Arnold looked as though he might faint, while Carrie's heart thumped like a drum in her chest. He had taken her side. David Lawrence had taken her side against Arnold. 'I think on this occasion, Mrs. Bateman should be given the opportunity to be involved in an event so different from the ones we're used to, and hopefully your servants will work all the harder for it. I can see only positives.' He looked at Arnold, his face innocent and without expression.

'I...I suppose so, sir,' Arnold stammered. 'If you think it's acceptable. It's just that Lady Mabel...'

'Oh, don't worry about Mabel. She's coming to tea with me next week. I'll talk her round. I think she's quite fond of me.' Carrie lowered her chin to her chest and smiled to herself, hoping Arnold wouldn't see it. She heard him swallow and pictured his throat moving up and down.

'Yes, sir. Of course, sir.'

David nodded. 'As you were, Bateman,' then turned to Carrie smiling. 'Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, Mrs. Bateman. I believe there will be a bit of a party here tonight. I hope you'll attend.' Carrie looked up at Arnold waiting for him to say something.

'We'll be here, Captain Lawrence.'

'Good. I'll see you there.' Carrie watched David walk away, then waited for the bomb to fall.

Arnold put his hand on her arm and walked her across to where Lady Mabel and her husband were holding court. 'Looks like you'll be helping our housekeeper with her daughter's wedding.' Carrie looked up at him but he didn't make eye contact, as though he found it unbearable to look at her. 'Make sure you make a good fist of it, or I'll never hear the end of it.'

Carrie inhaled deep into her lungs, realising she had escaped a tongue-lashing from Arnold, then smiled to herself. Things were moving forward, and she had the party to look forward to that evening where David Lawrence would be present. She knew in her heart she should not have been craving another man's attentions while married to someone else, but knowing what she did about Arnold she realised that the 'marriage' she had signed up to wasn't a marriage at all, but a business deal, a convenience to Arnold and Florrie, and she was the one who had made it possible for them to get what they wanted. Now it was time for her to get what she wanted.



Chapter 22

For three weeks it rained, not as Carrie had imagined it would, like a never-ending waterfall as she had been told the monsoons brought with it, but just as she had become used to in London, an intermittent drizzle that seeped into everything it touched, and it was very welcome. It was still humid, the dank, clammy atmosphere that never seemed to dissipate no matter what time of the day it was, but there was also a freshness when the showers stopped. Carrie would take John outside, holding him in her arms as she strolled around the bungalow, breathing in the cleaner air that the rain had left behind until the atmosphere drew in again under dark, omnipresent clouds and the rain was released once again.

She had given Gita the good news that she could help with Aashi's wedding to Devak Mistry and Gita had been elated.

'Really, Madam. Oh, that is such wonderful news,' she said, clapping her hands. Then she'd frowned. 'But the sahib? He knows?'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, Gita. He knows.'



THE WEDDING DAY WAS set for the end of September when the rains had stopped and the weather was set fair. Gita's workload in the bungalow increased simply because of her nervous energy; if there was nothing to do she found something, she was everywhere, working very quickly, and the smile didn't leave her face such was her excitement.

The official betrothal, the *vagndana*, and the written declaration of their intent, the *lagna-patra*, signalled the visiting of the groom's parents to the bride's home. Gita told Carrie what would happen next.

'There will be a procession, Carrie, with drummers and musicians. It will be so wonderful but I am very nervous. Davak Mistry's parents will come to our home where we will give them refreshments. We must decorate our house to welcome them and show them they have certainly made the right choice of a wife and family. Everyone will be polite. We will bow and offer them the best seats and the best dishes, and we will be watching Devak and Aashi to make sure they follow tradition. This is the best thing we can do for her and it must be done properly because everyone will be watching us to make sure the customs are followed and Devak's parents will expect it.'

'It all sounds so wonderful, Gita. Aashi is very lucky. What will you

give them to eat?’

Gita thought for a moment. ‘Perhaps rice and lentil dumplings and gobhi porichathu.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Fried cauliflower with curry leaves and paratha bread. It is delicious.’

‘And then?’

‘Red onion fritters with a jam made from chilies with *puli saddam*, tamarind rice. Very hot, very nice. And after, banana fritter with almond barfi and *boondi laddoo*, sweets Aashi and I will make for them to finish their meal.’

‘And then?’

Gita was delighted at Carrie’s enthusiasm. ‘There will be prayers, *abhiseka*, to give thanks for bringing the young people together and to wish them a happy life in their future.’

‘And the wedding will follow?’

‘Not until the *Gruhapravesam* has been carried out. Devak and his father have built a small bungalow for him and Aashi to live in when they are married. This is a very modern thing. The *Gruhapravesam* is the blessing or warming of the house before they live there. It must be carried out before the wedding because they will go there after the ceremony and it can take a whole afternoon to perform. There is a blessing for the entrance called *Vastu Pooja*, and a priest conducts the *Vastu Shani* inside the home to create peace and harmony and stop any unsettling feelings. We then give the priest refreshment to thank him for his services. The house must not be left unattended for three days following the *Gruhapravesam*. Doors and windows must be unlocked, so we have paid someone to stay there for the following days. I expect this all seems strange to you, Carrie. But it is just our way.’

‘No, please, it is so...different, and nothing like my own wedding. It sounds very exciting. You and your husband have taken so much trouble. I hope Aashi appreciates it.’

‘Oh, yes, she does. She is trying to pretend she doesn’t like Devak Mistry very well, but we know...’ She tapped the side of her nose and smiled broadly. ‘The meeting with the Mistris will take place on Sunday. We have invited a *gyotishee* to deliver their *raashiphal*, their horoscopes, and I am sure the reading will show great happiness together.’

‘What if it doesn’t?’

‘It always does. The *gyotishee* knows how to read the signs, and the signs are good. They have tender and loving aspects, with harmony and passion. We have chosen very well.’



THE WEDDING TOOK PLACE the following week, at the end of September, as the days slid seamlessly into a spring-like October. Carrie became a helpmate to Gita, patting her down when she became anxious, helping to prepare the food which seemed to Carrie to be never-ending, although Gita assured her it would all be eaten, and taking part in the constant chatter about the wedding, the music, the costumes, the jewellery. Particularly the jewellery.

‘Devak has made me something very special,’ said Aashi. ‘You know he is a very clever jeweller and I think it will be a piece like he has never made before.’

Carrie looked up from rolling chapatti dough and smiled. ‘You sound very proud.’

‘I am. I know I will be very well looked after.’

‘Will you have children?’

‘Mm, eventually, but not too soon. Everyone, including my mother, thinks we will have babies right away, but it’s not what I want.’

‘What do you want?’

‘To get a job. A proper job, perhaps for the Indian Civil Service. I am capable of doing such a job, at least as good as any man. If I have children straight away I will forever be a mother and nothing else. I want much more, maybe to travel. I can have my babies later, when I’m more ready. I’m sure Devak will agree.’

Carrie nodded and smiled and wondered if she should put Aashi in touch with Dorothy whose views seemed to be similar to Aashi’s, but she was quite sure Gita wouldn’t thank her. She continued to roll out the chapattis in silence. She was fully aware of the best intentions held by the young, including herself. She was also aware of how family pressure could change those intentions, no matter how strong they were, and she was sure she would be hearing some very happy news not too far into the future.

‘I hear the wedding went very well.’

‘Yes, it was beautiful. Really something. The colours, the music, the food...and the ceremony was wonderful. I felt very honoured to be there.’

Dorothy smiled. ‘You’re a breath of fresh air, do you know that?’

Carrie tilted her head and looked at her. She thought Dorothy seemed a little sad, a little far away. They were at a leaving party at the Secunderabad Club for one of the civil servants who was going back to England. He had married in India, but his new wife was desperate to return to Cheshire where she was from, and he had capitulated.

‘You look a bit down, Dorothy. Are you okay? There’s nothing wrong is there?’

Dorothy breathed deeply and turned to Carrie with a less than cheerful smile. ‘We’re going home, darling. Marcus and I. Back to London.’

Carrie’s mouth dropped open. ‘What? No. You can’t. I mean...oh, Dorothy, what am I going to do? No one else speaks to me, only you. Please don’t go.’

Dorothy closed her eyes and lowered her head. Her face was pale and Carrie noticed her eyes were ringed with red as though she had been crying. This was not the Dorothy Carrie had come to know. ‘It’s my sister, Carrie. She’s very ill, extremely so. She has children, so little, so close to their Mama, but I think...I think they will lose her.’

Carrie’s expression changed and she put her hand to her face to cover her embarrassment. ‘I’m so sorry, Dorothy. It’s awful.’ She looked away wishing she hadn’t gone on so about Dorothy being the only one who spoke to her, almost begging her to stay. She looked back and put her hand on her friend’s arm. ‘I’m so selfish, aren’t I? I’m sorry, Dorothy. You must be so worried.’

Dorothy put her arm around Carrie’s shoulders and hugged her. ‘I would love to stay. I feel I have found a real friend in you, so much more than those other silly wittering woman who have never had a day’s difficulty in their lives. I was dreading coming to India, but you made it so much better. Just knowing you were here has helped me get through what I thought would be a nightmare.’

Carrie looked at her in surprise. ‘How have I helped you?’

‘Don’t forget I’ve been here before, with my parents when I was a girl. Things haven’t changed much. People like Mabel Dimmock are living in the dark ages and unfortunately she is the *burra* memsahib around here so she calls the shots. She hates me too, for being too...what did she say to Marcus? That I was too forward and had ideas that were incongruous to my upbringing and the ideals of my parents who must be terribly disappointed in how I’ve turned out.’

Carrie pressed her lips together to prevent herself from laughing. ‘Well, I don’t know what a lot of that means, Dorothy, but I think you’ve turned out fine.’

Dorothy giggled and kissed Carrie’s cheek. ‘Me too.’ She released Carrie and stared at her.

‘What?’

‘We’re leaving in two days. We must go now in case something happens to Leonora. There will be no one there to pick up the reins and it’ll take at least three to four weeks before we get back to London. We can’t rely on our parents to have the children. They’re getting on a bit.’

‘So soon?’ said Carrie, her stomach flipping with anxiety.

Dorothy put a finger under Carrie’s chin and tipped her face towards her. ‘Now darling, I have to talk to you because there are couple of things I promised myself I would do before I go back to London. And they both concern you.’

Carrie’s eyes widened. ‘Me?’

‘I want to make sure you’re going to be alright. I know I must go back for my poor dear sister, but...I want to know you’re safe. I must know you’re safe or I’ll worry all the time and never forgive myself if anything untoward happens to you.’

‘What’s going to happen to me?’

‘Exactly. So...’ She reached into her purse and pulled out a set of keys.

‘What are they?’

‘They’re keys, darling.’

‘I know, Dorothy. But what are they for?’

She pointed to the smaller one. ‘This one is for my car.’

Carrie gasped. ‘Your car?’

‘Yes, I know. I’ve only had the damned thing for a couple of weeks. I was planning to take us all over when you’d got the wedding thing out of the way. Anyway, I want you to have it, to look after it for me until I come back.’

‘I think you’re forgetting something, Dorothy. I don’t drive.’

‘No, but you will. I’ve organised some lessons for you. You must drive, Carrie. You can’t rely on other people to ferry you around when you’re doing what you’re going to do.’

‘And what’s that?’

She pointed to the bigger key. ‘This is the key to Zaina’s shop in James Street. I bought the tenancy. I was going to ask you to run it for me, and I was going to pop in here and there, but I’m going to be much too far away to pop in anywhere I’m afraid.’

‘Dorothy, how can I run a shop? I don’t have the first clue.’

‘You see,’ said Dorothy, vigorously shaking her head. ‘I don’t believe that. I’ve been hearing lots of things about Aashi’s wedding, how you organised the decoration of the ceremony room, how you helped Gita with her outfit, and became Aashi’s dresser. You even cooked much of the food. I also heard it was one of the best weddings this station has ever seen, and was in part, thanks to you and your ideas and your calm control. That is all you need. I think you love clothes, Carrie, and if Arnold was the kind of man who indulged you, you would have an extensive wardrobe.’

Carrie nodded and smiled. ‘I have found an interest. I realised when I went shopping that many of the shops here don’t sell the type of clothes women can buy in Bombay or Calcutta. I know they have to

rely on catalogues to order the things they want and more often than not they don't arrive in time and the event has been and gone before they can wear them.'

'Zaina doesn't leave until the end of next week, so it will give you time to organise John's *ayah*. She will be able to bring him to you in the daytime and you'll probably see him even more than you do now. This is the spare key, and the owner of the building will give you the other key when you take over.' Dorothy gripped her hand. 'We can do this, Carrie. You can do it. I trust you implicitly and I know it will be a complete success.'

'I think we're forgetting something.'

'What's that?'

'Arnold.'

Dorothy's expression changed and she looked almost scheming. 'Don't worry about Sergeant Major Bateman. He won't give you any trouble.'

Carrie frowned. 'But...'

Dorothy looked closely at her. 'It's dealt with. You have no one to answer to. I promise.'

Carrie felt swept away by what Dorothy had done and was on the verge of tears. She had come through many changes, some she hadn't wished for and some she had relished, but she could see that what Dorothy had done would change her life. She swallowed hard, tears making her eyes glitter. 'You said there were a couple of things.'

Dorothy got up and held out her hand. 'My car's outside. We're going on a little trip.' Carrie looked across at Arnold who was standing at the bar, strands of thin hair hanging down the side of his face that he hadn't bothered to sweep across his forehead. His laughter was louder than anyone else's and as he brought a cigarette to his lips, the tips of his fingers were stained with the brown residue of nicotine. Dorothy raised her eyebrows. 'As I said, darling, you don't need to worry about Arnold anymore.'



Chapter 23

It was a beautiful evening. Dorothy had folded down the roof of her Swift motor vehicle, and she and Carrie wore long Indian scarves tied around their hair which trailed behind them in the breeze as Dorothy drove at speed.

‘It’s a beautiful car, Dorothy. Actually, it’s only the second time I’ve travelled in a car. Arnold organised one for Gita and me when we went to James Street to buy my outfit for the Charity Open Day.’

‘Yes, it’s lovely, isn’t it. Marcus ordered it for me to be delivered when we arrived in India but the waiting list for them is very long, so I had to wait a bit. I haven’t really had the opportunity to make the most of it.’ She glanced at Carrie. ‘I want you to use it, Carrie. It will set you free, I promise. You can use it for getting to the shop on James Street, and also for taking John for days out. There are some wonderful places to see in India and I’m guessing you haven’t seen any of them.’

‘No, no, I haven’t.’

‘Well, there you are. It’ll be perfect for you to make a life for yourself here.’

Carrie nodded but she couldn’t help feeling apprehensive. ‘I’m a bit nervous about driving. You seem to be very good at it.’

‘You’ll get used to it, darling. You’ll be the envy of the *mofussil*, you wait and see. I’ve every faith you’ll make some new friends because of it. People want us to be useful to them don’t they? I’m not sure any of the other wives drive. They’ll very likely hope you’ll be their transport. Don’t give in too easily, that’s all I’d say. They’ve treated you abominably and your elevation to driver and business owner will give them a real shock. The other thing I want you to know is that people in trade are often shunned by the upper classes.’

‘Oh? Why?’

‘It’s too obvious a show of having to work for a living, but don’t forget to remind them if it wasn’t for the fact their husbands were working, either in the Army or for the Indian Civil Service, they wouldn’t be here sunning themselves on their verandas and sipping mint julep. Promise me, darling.’

‘I promise.’ Carrie smiled. ‘I wish I was more like you, Dorothy. You’re so confident and you have such modern ideas...and a husband who supports you in everything.’

‘I know how fortunate I am. Marcus always puts me first.’ She glanced at Carrie again. ‘Don’t let Arnold control you, Carrie. You are

a very capable young woman. You just haven't had the opportunity to test yourself yet.'

'I have a feeling that's all going to change, thanks to you.' She looked about her and frowned. 'Where are we going, Dorothy?'

To the Hussain Sagar Lake.'

Carrie's eyes widened. 'Why? It's a long way from the station.'

'Not when you have a car, darling, which is the whole point.' Dorothy tightened her hands on the steering wheel. 'I've asked someone to take care of you while I'm away.' They turned off the main road onto the Necklace Road that follows the lakes perimeter and into Sanjeevaiah Park.

'Is it Gita?'

Dorothy threw her head back and laughed. 'No, it's not Gita.'

Dorothy drove them around the lake and Carrie marvelled at the beauty of it in the dusky light, a gentle breeze rippling across its surface.

'The lake,' she breathed, and glanced momentarily at Dorothy. 'It's huge.'

'Yes, and very beautiful at night. The lights will come on soon and you'll see how romantic this place is. The lake was built in the shape of a heart, for lovers I expect, but there's also a bird sanctuary and a fun maze. Families come here to relax. Perhaps you'll come here with John,' Dorothy said as she pulled the Sprite to a halt. 'We're here.'

'Where exactly?' Dorothy nodded towards a bench. Sitting on the bench was David Lawrence. Carrie felt her breath catch in her throat and she turned to Dorothy, her eyes wide with anticipation. 'Why is Captain Lawrence here?'

Dorothy shuffled round in her seat to face Carrie and took her hand. 'First of all, he asked you to call him David. He is only Captain Lawrence to the soldiers in his unit of which you are not one. And second...he is the person I've asked to keep an eye on you.'

Carrie was horrified. She felt herself go hot and cold in a matter of seconds, and with trembling hands she pushed her breeze swept hair out of her eyes. 'I don't know what to say,' she whispered. 'I never dreamt... Oh, my Lord, I'm so embarrassed. And when Arnold finds out my life won't be worth living. Dorothy what have you done?'

'Arnold won't find out. I know you like David. I know he's been kind to you because he is a kind and thoughtful man. I have known him for years. He was here with his parents when I was here with mine. He knows India like the back of his hand, and unlike some of the men here is madly in love with this amazing country. Please, Carrie. Happiness is waiting for you. Grab it, darling, with both hands.'

Carrie opened the vehicle door and closed it gently, then began to

walk towards David. He held out his hand and as she got to him she clasped it. He smiled at her, his dark brown eyes not leaving her face for a moment, his expression one of joy and kindness.

‘Carrie,’ he said, gently. ‘You came.’



99 Nightingale Lane

Part 3



Chapter 24

Dear Pearl,

I can't tell you how sorry I was to hear about William. I can't imagine how you must be feeling, and I wish with all my heart I could be with you to comfort you. At the very earliest, this letter will take a month or so to get to you. If only I could be with you. I'd give anything to come back home, but, you know who said it's not possible because I'm needed here to help him push his way up the ladder. If only I could turn back the clock.

Dearest Pearl I've had an idea. Things have changed somewhat for me here in Secunderabad. Dorothy has had to return home to nurse her ailing sister and care for the children. She rented a dress shop in Secunderabad that had become empty before she knew she must leave India so that she and I could work together, and in her absence she's given me the keys and asked me to run it, with Gita's help of course. Pearl, I'd love it if you would consider coming to India. I know it's a big thing, a big adventure, especially asking you to travel on your own, but you could help me with the shop and we would be together again like in the old days.

Take a deep breath, Pearl and really think about it. I'm not planning on it being forever. I'm determined to come back to Whitechapel one day. London is my real home and where my family is, but being here with me for a while would take you away from the bad memories and everything the war is doing to you all in London. I've heard some terrible things and it's made me so worried. You would earn more money than you're earning as a skivvy at Nightingale Lane, and you could put it by for when you return to England. Please consider it. We could look after each other.

I'll be holding my breath until I hear from you. Please come, Pearl. It would be so wonderful to have my dearest friend with me again.

Thinking of you always.

Lots of love

Carrie x



Chapter 25

Dearest Dorothy,

I'm so sorry to hear about your sister. One of Marcus's men told Arnold what had happened. Dear Dorothy, you must be desolate at losing your beloved sister and I am so sorry for your loss. I hope you and the children are bearing up. Poor little mites. How they must miss their mother.

For me, I must confess, I miss your company dreadfully. Life here was much more bearable when I knew you were just a short walk across the mofussil. You brought so much light into my life. Perhaps you'll come back one day, and bring the children with you. John would love the company of other children, I'm sure. There aren't many new children here yet, but I live in hope he will have some friends when he is a bit older.

The shop is doing very well. Gita and I are loving working together. She has changed so much, Dorothy, and not being in service has improved her confidence and belief in herself. She walks straighter now, and I've insisted she dress from the shop. She is a very beautiful woman with a lovely figure for her age and she's the perfect model. She and her daughter have both brought in new customers and we are often swept off our feet with how busy we are. Gita also has a very good eye for colour. Her choices are always spot on, and some of the dresses we have imported from England and France are stunning.

I hope you don't mind, but in the light of Pearl's dreadful loss and heartfelt grief I've invited her to Secunderabad if she can get a passage from England. I want to help her like you've helped me, Dorothy. She must be at rock bottom at the moment and I certainly know how that feels. I think it would help her take her mind off her troubles if she were to help out in the shop. We could do with another pair of hands. I thought she could stay in the apartment over the shop, at least for a while. I hope you agree it's a good idea and I'll eagerly await your reply.

Lots of love

Carrie x



Chapter 26

Dear Mum and Dad,

I know I've written before but I feel I should write again because I haven't heard from you. I hope you've received my letters, at least four now, because I've not received any news from you about home and I can only think you haven't received them. Could all my letters have gone astray? I'm desperate to know how all of you are, particularly little Rose and how she's thriving. I'm wondering why you haven't replied. I can't help but worry. If you don't want to write or haven't got time, please ask Tommy to send me a note. That's all I ask, to let me know you're all well.

Your little grandson, John is very bonny now. He's sitting up on his own and giggles and smiles all the time. He is a joy to me and I love him dearly, and I know the day you meet him you'll love him too. He needs to meet his grandparents and when he does I know you'll be important to him.

I miss everyone at home, Mum and Dad. No matter what happened in those dark days before I hope we can put the past behind us and be a family again. You all mean so much to me and I long for the day when we can all be together again, like we used to be.

Your loving daughter,

Carrie x



Chapter 27

The station in Secunderabad was busier than Carrie remembered it on her arrival six months earlier. Her thoughts went back to the day she first stepped off the train from Bombay and into her new life with Arnold Bateman, a man she called her husband, yet had never behaved like one to her.

October had brought with it sweltering weather, and she had raised the canopy over the Sprite so she and John, who was strapped into his carrycot on the back seat, wouldn't be burnt by the unforgiving sun that beat down on the earth like a furnace. She glanced into the backseat and smiled. John was in a deep slumber that had fallen on him as soon as she'd started the engine. She knew if ever he couldn't sleep, laying him in his carrycot and allowing the engine to idle was the way to sweet dreams for all of them, and she thanked Dorothy every day for the gift of freedom, and of sleep.

John had blossomed into a beautiful little boy. He was a happy, placid child, with a mop of curly brown hair and deep blue eyes. The conker-coloured hair, she knew, came from Johan, but the eyes were all hers and she was very proud of the way they sparkled, and reflected his sweet personality. She also knew that every time Arnold glanced at her boy, which was only when his gaze inadvertently fell upon him and he had no choice, he was reminded of who John's father was. This pleased Carrie more than she ever thought possible. She hadn't known she had those kinds of feelings in her, the ones where she felt as though she had exacted a much-needed revenge for everything Arnold had put her through, for all the humiliation and pain he had inflicted on her, and she was no longer ashamed that he wasn't John's father. She was relieved, relieved and delighted that Arnold Bateman would never, ever, father a child, particularly a boy, because she could only assume that his dislike of women would be passed down, just as Arnold's father's unacceptable behaviour towards his mother had been passed down, like a trophy, to him.

Arnold hated women. He had proved it not just by the way he had treated his own mother, and in turn, Carrie, but also because he had taken another man as his lover. Carrie had been utterly shocked at her discovery of Arnold's predilection for young men, but as she had matured so had her willingness to accept those things outside of her understanding. It no longer mattered to her that he had no feelings for her other than those of disdain, because she didn't love Arnold, had never loved him and could never love him. She had also realised that

it wasn't because of Arnold's choices in his personal life that she couldn't love him, but simply because he was the most unpleasant, hateful person she had ever met.

As Carrie sat in the car waiting, she heard the tumultuous sound of a train arriving at the platform, the unmistakable sound cutting through the chatter of the gathering masses. She opened the door and stepped out, then lifted John from his carrycot and settled him on her hip. She walked from the perimeter of the station into the huge grey baroque building with its turrets and flags, where the air was cooler and the aroma of the abundant food stalls was mouth-wateringly tempting.

Making her way to the main platform where she knew the train from Bombay had arrived in a cacophony of billowing steam and cranking of gears, and wheels grinding against the breaks with an ear-splitting squeal, she inhaled a deep breath, anticipation making her nervous. Was Pearl a passenger on the train, or had she been so hurt by her grief and fears that she couldn't bear the thought of leaving the surroundings she knew?

Her path to the platform through a stone arch was interrupted time and time again as she dodged the tidal wave of travellers moving towards her. There were many new Europeans stepping off the train. They looked as apprehensive as she had felt when she first arrived, and she had complete sympathy for them. They had likely travelled for weeks on unfamiliar transport from the other side of the world and had landed in a strange, dusty, colourful country where the inhabitants camped for days on station platforms with their cooking stoves and bedding. She could see it in their eyes, the uncertainty, the apprehension, and perhaps even dismay at their exotic and disorganised surroundings.

Carrie stood on tiptoe, peering over the heads of the travellers disgorged from the carriages. Where was Pearl? Had she decided the journey was too arduous, too dangerous for her to contemplate alone at a time of war? Had the money for her passage from England to India not arrived in time for her to travel? Or was it simply that her grief was so great she could not contemplate leaving the home she knew for an adventure that would test the hardest traveller?

And then Carrie saw her...

Pearl had alighted from the train last of all the travellers. She was dressed in a faded pink tea dress patterned with birds, and dark brown buttoned shoes. She held a small suitcase and was looking around the platform and the myriad men women and children as though she had arrived on another planet. Strands of her thick red hair had escaped her straw hat and her eyes were huge in her pale face, now gaunter than Carrie had ever seen it.

‘Pearl?’

Pearl’s face broke into a relieved smile and they ran towards each other. Carrie flung her free arm around her friend’s neck, and Pearl held Carrie so close she thought she would squeeze the breath out of her.

‘Oh, Pearl, I’m so glad to see you. Are you alright? How was the journey? I’ve been so worried about you being on your own, yet here you are. You’re so brave.’ Carrie gently pushed Pearl away from her and looked into her eyes. ‘Are you alright, sweetheart?’

Pearl’s eyes flooded with tears and she nodded uncertainly, as if to convince herself. ‘I miss him so much, Carrie. When he was away I’d counted the days to his return and it wasn’t so bad. I had something to look forward to, but now...now there’s nothing. It’s broken my heart. And the thought of him going through pain...and the fear. I can hardly bear it.’

Carrie threaded her arm through Pearl’s and walked her off the platform, through the bustling ticket office and out into the blazing sun towards the car. ‘I know, Pearl. I’m so sorry. I know how much you loved him.’

Pearl nodded. ‘He was my world, Carrie. I can’t imagine life without him. We had such high hopes for our life together.’

Carrie squeezed Pearl’s hand. ‘I know. I know,’ she said gently.

When they reached the Sprite, Pearl bent down and took John’s face in her hands and rubbed his ruddy cheeks with her thumbs. ‘God, he’s gorgeous, Carrie, and oh, look at that hair. It’s so like...’ she stopped and pulled a face.

Carrie smiled. ‘It’s okay, Pearl, you can say it. It’s like Johan’s.

Pearl shrugged. ‘He’s like his dad isn’t he? What a shame he doesn’t know about him. Anyone would be proud to have a little boy like John.’

Carrie kissed Pearl on the cheek. ‘I am proud, Pearl. And he’s got me...and you, and Gita, and Dorothy...and his *ayah*.’

Pearl’s eyes widened. ‘His what?’

Carrie laughed again. ‘There’s so much for you to get used to. It took me a while I can tell you, but...yes, things are alright now. And you’re here, and that makes everything perfect.’

She settled John in the carrycot in the back seat, indicating for Pearl to sit in the front passenger side then started the engine and pulled onto the track that led to Trimulgherry.

‘You can drive, Carrie. That’s very modern. I don’t know anyone else who drives, not even Mrs Stern.’

‘I’ve had lessons. Dorothy left the car for me to use. It’s called a Sprite. Her husband, Marcus bought it for her, but as I mentioned in my letters she’d been called back home to nurse her sister and look

after her sister's children. Unfortunately, her sister passed away and now it's up to Dorothy to raise them. I could never see Dorothy with children but she says she's enjoying being with them. She was very close to her sister. She must miss her.' She glanced at Pearl. 'You and Dorothy will get on really well, Pearl. I know you'll like her. She's very different, very opinionated and not what we're used to in the society we've been brought up in, but she has a heart of gold.'

'And Gita? She sounds wonderful.'

'Yes, she's a lovely person. Very homely and motherly. Exactly what I needed when I arrived here. She knew, you see, knew I wasn't like the others. Even though I was supposed to be her...well, boss, I suppose, her memsahib, I couldn't be like that. I didn't feel comfortable treating her as if she was less than me, which she plainly isn't.'

'Is it what other people do, then?'

Carrie nodded. 'I don't like the way the people in service are treated here. The thing is, you and I know what it feels like to be a servant, to not be seen and not be heard, to do the things them with all the money don't want to do. I can't treat human beings like that. Gita has been...like a mum, to be honest. She's really looked out for me, and she and her family have treated me like one of them. And, yeah, I got into trouble with the others for it.'

'Really? Why?'

'Because Europeans are not allow to have anything to do with the natives. It goes against the stupid rules of their society, yet she's shown me more respect and friendship than any of them, apart from Dorothy of course.' She inhaled a deep breath at the memory. 'Arnold was furious with me because I told everyone at the Military Ball I'd agreed to help Gita with her daughter's wedding. Honestly, Pearl, you would have thought I'd offered to murder someone instead of making chapattis. The other wives had barely spoken to me before that but they definitely didn't after. It was like I'd got some kind of disease.' Pearl looked worried and Carrie laughed. 'Don't worry. You won't come into contact with any of that.'

Pearl pulled a face. 'I'm glad to hear it.'

Carrie glanced at her again and smiled broadly. 'I'm so glad you're here. I can hardly believe it. I feel safe at last.'

'Do you?'

Carrie nodded. 'You were the person I didn't want to leave behind, Pearl. Only you. I miss Mum and Dad, and Tom and Alfie, but it's you I've missed the most.'

'What about Elsie? She's your sister. Little Rose is gorgeous. A beautiful little girl. I saw her walking towards Covent Garden pushing a pram and I went over to say hello and have a look. She didn't even

mention you so thought I'd better not.'

Carrie's expression changed and a sadness overtook her. 'Me and Elsie...we were never that close. I feel very sad that I haven't seen Rose or been part of it all, but they sent me away, didn't they, Pearl. And they've never written to me. Even Elsie...or Tom. I've written to them loads but they've never replied. It's like I don't exist in their world anymore.' Pearl stared at her then looked away and bit her lip. 'Anyway,' she said, changing the subject, 'I'm taking you to the shop. I want to get you settled in the apartment. It's small but very nice. Dorothy had it all done up when she took on the lease. And then I thought we'd go for some lunch. There are some lovely restaurants on James Street.'

'A restaurant? Carrie, I've never eaten in a restaurant before.'

'Well, don't let that put you off. It's just like eating at home, except you haven't had to buy, prepare or cook the food. Or serve it to people who don't have the manners to say thank you.' She glanced at Pearl again. 'It's really quite nice.'

'The food on the train wasn't nice. And it wasn't much better on the ship.'

Carrie threw back her head and laughed. 'I did warn you.'



SHE PULLED THE SPRITE up in front of the shop and switched off the engine.

'Well? What do you think?'

Pearl looked up at the sign on the shop. "Carrie's Closet". Oh, my goodness.'

Carrie grinned. 'It was Dorothy's idea. I wanted it to be named after her but she said the customers would want to be served by the name over the door. I suppose that's me at the moment.'

Pearl sat quietly looking around, her eyes flitting from one thing to another. The street was busy as it usually was at that time of day, the noise of carts, vehicles and people constantly in the background. 'I suppose it's a bit like London, only hotter.'

Carrie laughed. 'I think you'll find lots of things in Secunderabad are very different to London, Pearl, but...you'll have plenty of time to find out.'

They left the car and Pearl and Carrie, carrying John in her arms, went into the shop where Gita was rearranging shelves. She straightened up and smiled when she heard the bell on the door.

'You're back.'

'Yes,' said Carrie. 'And this is Pearl.'

Pearl and Gita said hello and embraced. 'It's so good to meet you,

Gita. Carrie has written about you many times.'

Gita laughed. 'Oh, dear. Hopefully, she is pleased with me.'

Carrie handed John to her. 'Always, Gita. Would you mind having John for ten minutes while I take Pearl upstairs to the apartment? You can close up for a few minutes if you like.'

Gita shook her head. 'Oh, no. The customers adore him. He sells as many dresses as I do. No need to close.'

Pearl followed Carrie up the winding staircase and through an archway to a door that led to the apartment. Carrie had cleaned everywhere herself and had put vases of flowers in the tiny living room that had a small kitchenette leading off it.

'Oh, Carrie. This is so pretty. Is it for me?'

'Yes, Pearl. This is your home for as long as you're here.' Pearl walked around the living room, nervously twisting her hat in her hands until her fingers reached out for the fine floral curtains at the windows and the tasselled cushions on the small settee. She bent to smell the flowers Carrie had placed on the table and when she straightened up there were tears in her eyes. 'Oh, Pearl. Don't cry. Please don't cry.'

Pearl shook her head. 'William would have loved this. I've never lived in a place such as this and I know he hadn't. It's proper luxury this is, proper posh, but I'm sorry, Carrie, I would rather have him any day.'

She burst into tears and Carrie enveloped her into her arms and held her close. 'Of course you would. Of course you would rather be with him. This is no substitute for the love you and William had, Pearl, but...I hope it will help you move forward when you're ready. If I could have come to you I would have, but now that I'm married Arnold has certain rights over what I do. There was nothing I could do but bring you here to me so I can look after you, and I will look after you. Me and Gita. We'll take care of you until you're strong enough to decide what you want for the future.'

Pearl lifted her head and nodded as she wiped her eyes and cheeks with a handkerchief. 'I know, and I'm grateful. I suppose I still can't believe I'll never see him again. It was so strange, Carrie. I'd just received a letter from him, from the front, and then his mum came round to our 'ouse to tell me she'd had a telegram from the war office saying he was missing presumed dead. Apparently there are lots of young men missing whose bodies they'll never find and William's one of them. It was like I could hear his voice in his letter, and then...nothing. If he was still alive he would have written before now to tell me how he is. His mum said the same. Neither of us have heard from him. He's gone.'

Carrie wiped her own tears threatening to fall from her chin and

dried her cheeks on her sleeve. She swallowed before she spoke, her throat tight with sadness.

‘This war has been so cruel. I wish they’d just stop it. All those men who’ve been killed, the future of the country just wiped out, and everyone at home left devastated. It makes me wonder what they’re gaining out of it.’

Pearl nodded. ‘The only comfort I have is that William said he was proud to do his duty. He was fighting for his country and I don’t think he would have had it any other way. It’s not like he was conscripted into the army. He volunteered like so many others. It was what he wanted and what he believed in, to defend his country for them what comes after us. It’s how I comfort myself when I’m so sad I think my heart will shatter, to know he died doing what he believed in.’

Carrie smoothed Pearl’s hair away from her damp face and squeezed her hand. ‘You look done in. I’ll make some tea. Why don’t you change into something lighter? If you don’t have anything go down to the shop and choose a few cotton dresses. Gita will help you. Have your tea first. I think you need to have a sleep as well. I’m going to take John home, then I’m coming back and I’ll stay the night here at the apartment so you’re not on your own. The ayah will take care of John while I’m away.’

Pearl looked astonished. ‘But what about Arnold. Won’t he want you at home?’

Carrie shrugged. ‘I shouldn’t think Arnold will notice. He has other things on his mind.’ She patted Pearl’s hand. ‘I’ll make that tea, and then you must sleep, and this evening we’ll go out for something to eat. I want you to feel at home here, to get some of the old Pearl back.’ She gave Pearl a sorrowful smile. ‘We’ll take care of you,’ she said gently.

Pearl nodded, her eyes shaded with sadness. ‘I know. I know you will.’



Chapter 28

Arnold was waiting for Carrie when she returned to the bungalow. He looked up briefly when she appeared at the door, then returned to his writing.

‘Where have you been?’ he asked without looking at her.

‘At the shop of course.’ She flung her hat onto the sofa and shifted John from her left hip to her right. The little boy clung onto the front of her dress pulling the fabric towards him so he could suck it.

‘With John?’

‘Why not with John? He’s come with me before.’

Arnold nodded, then swivelled the chair so he was facing her. ‘I think you’ve got something to tell me.’

Carrie glanced away on the pretext of rescuing her dress from John. ‘Oh? Like what?’

‘Like that guttersnipe, Pearl Watson has arrived in Secunderabad.’

‘Pearl’s no guttersnipe, and what if she is here? What difference does it make?’

‘It won’t make any difference to me. And you’d better make sure it doesn’t make any difference to you. You’re still my wife and you have duties to perform.’ Carrie raised her eyebrows and Arnold’s face turned to thunder. ‘I suggest you take that look off your face, miss.’

‘I know exactly what my duties are, Arnold. The question is, do you know what yours are?’

He got up quickly, sending the chair wheeling across the room. ‘Don’t overstep the mark. Your saviour, Dorothy Tremaine isn’t here anymore. You’re on your own, and it doesn’t matter what she thinks, or how she’s told you to behave. You’ll do as I tell you, and I’m telling you, you won’t be working in that fleapit much longer. There’s more than enough for you to do here, and if there isn’t I’ll find plenty for you to do.’

Carrie knew this was the moment. She had thought it would take much longer to get to this point, but Dorothy had coached her before she’d left for England about how to handle Arnold when she was no longer in Secunderabad and Carrie was prepared. It was something she’d hoped she wouldn’t need to do; threatening someone wasn’t her idea of how to live her life, but Arnold was a different kettle of fish altogether, and it was necessary to handle him in the same way he handled everyone around him. This was fighting fire with fire and she knew it.

‘Oh, really. Well, here’s a news flash. You’re not going to stop me

working in the shop, and you're not going to stop me from seeing Pearl. Do you want to know why?' he observed her under half-closed lids. She saw his pronounced Adam's apple move up and down in his throat as he swallowed. She had him on the ropes. This was a Carrie he hadn't seen before and she wished with all her heart she'd shown him this side to her when they'd first met.

'The reason you're not going to stop me is because I'm not the only one who knows about your preferences. And if you push it with me, those people are going to make it common knowledge, and honestly, Arnold. I'm not sure it's going to do your career much good.'

She saw his jaw harden and she was prepared for him to lash out at her.

'You've discussed my private life. How dare you?'

'Actually, no, I haven't discussed you because I'm so ashamed of being married to you that I wouldn't want to discuss you or our life together with anyone. Do you think your servants don't know? This is the problem with people like you, you think that anyone who has to work in service must be stupid. Either that, or they walk around with their eyes shut. Now I'm the first one to admit that anything that goes on in a house stays in the four walls, it's what's expected when you work for someone and no one wants to lose their job, but it doesn't mean we don't see things, or hear things. They know, Arnold, and they're not the only ones.'

Arnold looked rattled, wrong-footed, perhaps scared. 'Meaning?'

'Meaning that there are some outside these four walls who know what's going on. Maybe one of your 'friends' has spoken out of turn. Have you ever considered that?' He said nothing, and Carrie picked up her hat from the sofa and made for the bedroom with a now sleepy John on her hip. 'Anyway, what all that means is, if you don't drop it I'm going to pack my things, and John and I will move out.'

Arnold's eyes widened. This was the last thing he would want, and Carrie knew it. 'You can't do that.'

'Yes, I can. And I will. And everyone will want to know why, won't they? And I won't need to tell them, because there are people out there who already know what's going on here. It's up to you really. We either keep it nice and friendly as in, we don't bother one another, or, I move out and you'll have some explaining to do. To be honest, I'm not bothered either way.'

Arnold threw her such a look of utter hatred it shook her to her buttoned shoes, but Carrie was determined to hold her ground.

'It looks like I don't have a choice.'

'You have a choice, Arnold. You've always had a choice. Your problem is you always make the wrong one.' She turned and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. She closed her eyes and

inhaled a breath deep into her lungs, shaking with anxiety at what she'd just done. Leaning her back against the door she snuggled John to her until a smile played on her lips.

‘We’re winning, John,’ she whispered into his soft hair. ‘At last, we’re winning.’



Chapter 29

‘I want you to send her home. She has no place here.’

Carrie frowned and wiped her mouth on her napkin. The silence between her and Arnold had been heavily weighted and Arnold’s glowering on the other side of the table was making her uncomfortable. She was relieved when he broke the ice by speaking, even if he was saying something she didn’t want to hear.

‘Why, Arnold. What difference does it make to you whether she’s here or not, and she might be a woman and in your eyes something to be ignored, but she’s also an adult and a human being. She’s not a dog to be sent here, there and everywhere at your bidding.’

He forked a large piece of chicken into his mouth and answered her with his mouth full which made Carrie cringe. She came from a humble household that didn’t believe in airs and graces and ideas that made you stand out, but she’d known from an early age speaking with a full mouth was bad manners. ‘Why is she here? She’s not part of this...not part of why we’re here. We are here for a reason, Carrie, don’t forget it, which is because of me. My rise in the ranks of my profession will affect you. You’re my wife. We were married in the eyes of God, and no matter what our feelings are we must keep a united front to ensure our superiors have faith in us, in our...willingness to provide stability. We will need another child soon. You and I, a child of our own, to prove we’re...as one.’

Carrie laid her knife and fork carefully across her plate and took a deep breath. This man, so full of hypocrisy and belligerence who spoke to her of God and marriage had sunk to the depths.

‘And why am I here, Arnold?’ He raised his eyes from his plate and stared at her. ‘I’m a wife in name only, which, believe me, suits me just fine. There will be no child and you know it. You’re kidding yourself as usual. You’re using me to make you look respectable, I understand that, and I also understand you think it’s your right because you paid my mother for my services. Well, here’s what I think. I think you’ve had your money’s worth out of me. I’ve kept my mouth shut. I’ve said nothing about our marriage to anyone who can do you harm. Yes, Dorothy knows but she is a friend and I have entrusted that secret in her care, not for you, Arnold, but for me and for John. Thanks to you I’ve had absolutely no respect from any of your so-called friends since I’ve been here. You didn’t disagree with what they said about me, or stand by my side. You could have made it better, got them to think differently if you’d supported me, but your

dislike of me prevented you from doing the right thing. That was your choice, and as I've said to you in the past, the decisions you've made have done you no good.'

'She has interrupted our life...'

'No! She has not. What you don't like is that I have a friend, one who knows all about you and where you come from, your roots and your humble beginnings that are exactly the same as ours. You would much rather your colleagues and superiors thought you came from higher ground, but the truth is, Arnold, that you came from the same breeding ground as Pearl and me, the dirty back-streets of Whitechapel.'

Arnold's jaw sagged when he realised that he had lost much of his power over Carrie.

'You seem to have been spending a lot of time at the shop in the evening. The shop doesn't open at night does it? You have a child here and...and responsibilities...here, at the bungalow. I know our arrangement is unusual but you still have duties to perform for us as a family.'

'And I fulfil those duties, although I'm surprised you're even mentioning John. You hardly look at him.' Arnold looked sullen. 'The reason I have been at the shop so much is because Pearl is unwell. Her grief for William has weakened her and she is suffering terribly with prickly heat and headaches. I'm very worried it'll turn into the flu. We have been warned against it. Dorothy has written from England to say it is very bad this time. I'm just doing what anyone would do, Arnold, caring for a dear friend and I'll carry on doing so with or without your permission. Of course I can't take John with me. If it's something that can be caught,' she shook her head, 'I don't think it is right now, but if it turns into something then I want John to be safe. Surely you can understand that. You didn't seem to mind him being cared for by an *ayah* when we first arrived.'

'That was different.'

'The only difference is that it suited you. Now it doesn't.'

Arnold clicked his fingers and Gita entered the room carrying the next course of sweet pudding. She looked pointedly at Carrie, placed the dishes on the table and went back to the kitchen. Carrie folded her napkin and placed it on the table.

'Gita and I are going back to the shop now. The ayah will be here in a few minutes to take care of John. Your time is your own, I thought you would have appreciated that. Go to the Secunderabad Club and see your friends. It's what you like doing, isn't it?'

Arnold shrugged. 'Do what you have to do, for now, but I still think she should go back to England. If she's struggling then maybe India doesn't suit her. Maybe she should go back to Whitechapel to

her family and be looked after there. I don't see why you should take on the responsibility of her.'



OUTSIDE IT WAS DUSK, and lights were twinkling from the bungalow verandas. The night-birds had started up their calls. The loud alarm calls of the red lapwing and the hoots of barn owls had begun already. Carrie watched as one of the ghostly white birds flew slowly overhead, then nestled into a tree next to the bungalow with flapping wings that rustled the leaves, like the whisper of satin.

'What will you do, Carrie,' asked Gita, her eyes full of sadness. 'Will Miss Pearl have to go home?'

'Over my dead body,' said Carrie as she started up the Sprite. 'The cold season will be here soon won't it?' Gita nodded. 'How long?'

'Maybe a week...perhaps two, but it gets cold. So cold. I think you will be surprised.'

Carrie nodded. 'That's good. We know cold in England. We're used to it, and Pearl came in the warm season so she was bound to struggle a bit. She'll be alright. She's as tough as old boots really. Like me. Brought up with nothing, expects nothing.' She was interrupted by jackals calling into the increasingly dark night and she shuddered at their echoing cries. 'And it's not just being in India is it, her distress? Not just the heat?'

Gita shook her head and sighed. 'She is a broken girl, Carrie. Sometimes, when I am in the shop, I hear her crying above me. It will not matter where she is. Her heart is torn in two. Mending a broken heart so torn apart, is very hard.'

Carrie took a hand from the steering wheel as she drove towards James Street and placed it over Gita's clutched in her lap. 'But we'll try won't we, Gita? We have to try?'

Gita nodded again. 'Yes, Carrie. We will try.'

They found Pearl in the tiny living room, in her night clothes, her hair laying in unbrushed strands over her shoulders, sitting by the window and staring into space. She startled when they opened the door. Carrie's heart fell. This was so unlike Pearl, the girl who had been so optimistic and forthright when they'd worked together at Nightingale Lane. Carrie knelt down by her chair and smoothed Pearl's hair away from her face as Gita put water on the hob to make tea.

'Have you eaten, Pearl?' Pearl shook her head. 'You have to eat something, sweetheart. To keep your strength up.'

Pearl turned and faced Carrie. Her eyes were ringed red from crying. 'Why, Carrie? What's the point? Without him I've got nothing.'

‘You’ve got you, Pearl. You’re still here, and William wouldn’t like to think of you like this. Please, eat and drink something.’ She turned to Gita. ‘Is there any food in the cupboard?’ Gita opened each cupboard door in turn, then shook her head. ‘Can you go down to James Street, to one of the street vendors? Something light, Gita, and nutritious.’ Gita nodded and made for the door, then stopped and looked sadly at Pearl. ‘What is it Gita?’

‘A doctor perhaps, for Miss Pearl,’ she said, sotto voce.

Carrie glanced at Pearl, her sallow skin, the perspiration collecting at her hairline, the look of abandonment in her eyes. ‘Yes, Gita,’ she whispered. ‘I think you’re right. I’ll deal with it.’



BY NINE-THIRTY, PEARL was in bed and sleeping soundly. She had eaten a bowl of mulligatawny soup and a flatbread Gita had bought from one of the street vendors that regularly congregated in James Street as night fell. To Carrie’s surprise she had eaten with relish, clearly starving, and it had filled her belly and lowered her gently into a comfortable sleep. Carrie sighed with relief. She feared for Pearl, knowing that if her mind was broken it would eventually break her body, and it was something she couldn’t allow.

Smoothing back Pearl’s hair from her face that glistened with a sheen of moisture from her fever, her thoughts went to David Lawrence. He was the only person who could help her find a doctor for Pearl, not a doctor of the body, because Carrie was certain this was something Pearl didn’t need, but a doctor of the mind. She needed more than a friends’ care to assist her in coming to terms with losing William, and as much as Carrie wanted to be the one to help her, she wasn’t sure she could.

Gita finished in the kitchen and joined Carrie in the bedroom. She leant against the doorframe and watched as Carrie nursed Pearl.

‘What will you do, Carrie? She cannot be left.’

‘No, I’m thinking about it, Gita. I think I know someone who can help.’

‘Captain Lawrence?’

Carrie stared at her. ‘What? Do you know him?’

‘I know he is a friend to you and Miss Dorothy, and a good man. My cousin Chaitali works in his house as housekeeper. She says he is very fair man, very good, very kind.’

Carrie nodded. ‘I think he is the only one I can ask. There’s no point in asking Arnold. He couldn’t care less. He has said Pearl should go back to London, not because she has been unwell, he doesn’t know how ill she is, but because she is here for me and he doesn’t like it.’

'No, we know.'

'Do you?'

'Yes, Carrie. It is hard not to know things when you are working in someone's personal house. It is hard not to see things and hear things, even if we don't want to see them or hear them.'

Carrie rose from the bedside and straightened her skirts, then took Gita's arm and led her into the living room.

'And what have you seen and heard that you wished you hadn't?' She sat on the two-seater sofa with Gita next to her.

'I know he is not a husband to you. I know he has hurt you. I know I could lose my position in the house if he thought I had seen and heard things and I spoke of them to you...or anyone.'

'That won't happen, Gita. I wouldn't allow it.'

'But you cannot stay, Carrie. Why would you stay with such a man?'

'Isn't it what we do? Don't forget, this marriage was not my choice. This was an arranged marriage as much as any arranged marriage conducted in India. Your own daughter had a marriage ceremony this year. Did she choose her own husband?'

'No, but it is our way, it is what we know, and she accepted this. We chose...and we made sure we chose well. He will be good to her, he is good to her. His family is good. They come from a class who have a craft that has been in their family since old times. They make jewellery, the best, and the most beautiful. I am confident in their marriage.'

'But what if you discovered he'd been unkind to her, what would you do?'

'It would not be for me to do, it would be for her. If she left her husband and came home she would be in purdah, she would not leave the house, not for any reason. But...you know her, and she would not come home. She would go abroad, to another country so she could be a modern woman like the women in the West.'

'And is this what you think I should do?'

Gita looked up at Carrie, her eyes warm and steady. 'I think one day you will go back to your home, to where you came from, and when that day comes I will be very sad. You have become...like a daughter to me...I think of you like a daughter. You have shown me and my family more kindness than anyone has from the station. You are different, Carrie, yes, but you are also the same, because you are a woman, a beautiful woman who can love and be loved. It is not the right time for you to settle for what you have been forced to do. There is so much more for you to do and see, and one day you will find the one to join you.' Carrie looked down at her fingers entwined in her lap. Gita's words had settled on her heart and were gradually

softening it, the lightness of her voice lulling her into calmness. 'I think there was a time when you thought you had found him.'

Carrie glanced up and smiled and found Gita smiling back at her. 'Yes, I thought I had found him. I thought what we were doing was his way of showing how much he loved me, but I was wrong. My mother said I was stupid, that I probably wasn't the first, and even though he married, I wouldn't be the last he would take advantage of.' She looked away, embarrassed. 'Yes, I thought he was the one.'

Gita reached for her hand. 'You have John.'

Carrie smiled again and thought of the little boy who brought her so much love and joy. 'Yes, I have John, and even after everything that's happened, I wouldn't change it. I love him so much.'

'You should go back to him now,' said Gita.

Carrie shook her head and stood, ready to go back into the bedroom to check on Pearl. 'No, Gita, I must stay. I don't think Pearl should be on her own tonight.'

'I will stay.'

'No, you cannot stay. Your family?'

'They will understand. You must go, and tomorrow you must see Captain Lawrence and ask him to find a doctor for Miss Pearl.'

Carrie put her arms around the sparrow-like shoulders of the woman in front of her and hugged her, the one for whom she held so much respect. 'Gita, how can I ever thank you? I'll find Captain Lawrence first thing and ask him to help us. You're right about him. He is a good man and I'm sure he will know what to do. I want my friend to be how she was, the happy, confident girl she used to be. We can't bring William back but hopefully we'll find the old Pearl.'



Chapter 30

The next morning, after Arnold had left for a two-day excursion to the Mahendra Hills, Carrie made her way across the station with John on her hip. Always aware of the social expectations of women, no matter how innocent her task, she felt taking John would make visiting a single man in his bungalow more appropriate. Her destination was Captain David Lawrence's bungalow, and although the prospect of seeing him again excited her, she was a married woman and could not be seen to be behaving out of that sphere.

She had thought about David a lot since Dorothy had left India. His kindness and respectful way with her had won her over, but she wondered if he was just a charming man whom everyone respected, or was his kind and caring demeanour with her exclusive? She wanted it to be, she knew that. He had stolen her heart; when she saw him, even if it was a glimpse across the station or at the Secunderabad Club when she was accompanied by Arnold, her stomach flipped. Yes, he was handsome, yes he was kind and softly spoken, his voice well measured and beautifully intonated, but was she being swept away by her feelings of abandonment in India, a country so unknown to her even now, her need for closeness with another man after finding out that Arnold's affections lay elsewhere and always would?

She could never love Arnold, could never have loved him, not because of his personal tastes; that was for him to decide, but because of his treatment of her, his wife and the mother of an eight-month-old baby, a woman who had travelled thousands of miles to a strange country and given birth on a ship with no facilities. He had never acknowledged how difficult and uncomfortable it had been for her. She accepted that John was not his, but she wondered even if he had been would there have been any show of affection for him, a proud fathers' affection and love for a beautiful little boy. She doubted it. There was absolutely no respect for her, or, she had come to learn, for the female species. He had treated his mother appallingly, had even championed his father's actions when he had caused her to lose the baby she had been carrying when she had first met him.

The closer she got to David's bungalow the more nervous she felt. He had not gone to the Mahendra Hills with his unit. Arnold had informed her with some pride that he, Arnold, was leading the party; that David Lawrence was needed to chair a meeting to prepare for a visit from a man from the west of India called Gandhi. She had heard the rumours that he was determined, by non-violent means, to obtain

independent rule for India and was now the leader of The Indian National Congress, encouraging people like Gita and her family to rise up and verbally, and with a spirit of morality and independence, fight against those who were ruling them. She knew that the ruling class, according to Arnold, was very worried about Gandhi's growing popularity. Carrie had listened to Arnold and decided she had some sympathy with what Gandhi was trying to achieve, but she was certain Arnold would never agree with that view. She knew exactly how he felt about those he considered inferior to him. She wondered what David Lawrence thought of it, and she was almost certain his views would likely coincide with her own. He was a captain of men, certainly, but he was also fair and respectful.

As she got to the front screen of the bungalow Carrie bit her lip. If she could just stop thinking about him in those terms, look upon him as a man like any other, her stomach would not be somersaulting and a trail of perspiration would not be running down her back. The problem was he was not a man like any other, he had already professed an admiration and affection for her when Dorothy had taken her to the lake the night she had informed Carrie she was leaving India for England. He had taken her hand and told her to look upon him as a friend, that Dorothy had asked him to stand in her stead, and that he was honoured to do so until Dorothy returned to India and that she must turn to him if ever she needed help or assistance. This was one of those times, not for her it was true, but Carrie loved Pearl like a sister, so it would be helping Carrie too. She hoped their friendship would be enough for David Lawrence to want to assist them.

She gingerly held up a hand to knock on the front screen then lowered it and took a breath. She closed her eyes and when she opened them John gazed at her with his beautiful blue eyes, his chocolate brown hair ruffled by the breeze. She smiled at him and to her delight he smiled back.

'Alright, John,' she whispered. 'I know what I have to do.' She lifted her hand again and rapped on the screen. A few moments passed, then David Lawrence appeared through the screen. He was startled when he saw her. She saw his expression change and she wasn't sure if he was glad to see her, or embarrassed that she'd called on him at his home.

'Carrie.'

'David. I'm so sorry to disturb you at home, but you said I could call on you if I needed help. I should say it's not for me, but for a friend.'

'Of course, of course, come in, please.'

She stepped across the threshold feeling nervous, and went into

David's large living room; typically masculine décor with brown furniture from home, yet softened with huge pieces of art he'd hung on the walls and brightly woven rugs underfoot. She breathed in as she got to the centre of the room, his smell, the unique cologne he wore, overlaid slightly with the pungent tobacco everyone smoked, so popular in India.

He followed her in, indicating for her to sit on a buttoned leather settee as he lit a cigarette and sat opposite her.

'How can I help? Oh, I'm sorry, Carrie, I should have offered some refreshment, particularly in this heat. I'm afraid I don't possess the hosting niceties you ladies have and I forget sometimes. What can I get for you, some mint tea perhaps or elderflower cordial?'

She nodded. 'Some cordial, please.'

'And John? Will he have a biscuit? I had some of my favourites sent over from England.'

She smiled and looked down at her son. 'John would love a biscuit.'

David nodded and, leaving his cigarette in an ashtray, went into the kitchen, returning with an elaborately decorated glass of cordial and a biscuit with white icing across the top. Carrie's eyes widened. 'He'll love that,' and laughed.

'Now,' said David, sitting in front of her. 'What can do to help you?'

'It's my friend, Pearl. She came over from England a few weeks ago. Her fiancé was killed at the front, and I so wanted to go home to comfort her, but Arnold said it wouldn't be possible. The passage cost so much and for me to go out there and return, well, he wasn't prepared to find the money, so I invited her here. Dorothy helped me with her fare. The trouble is, it's clear Pearl isn't well. She has stopped caring about anything, even herself, her appearance is awful, because she's pining for her William. Her grief is awful to see, and Gita and I have done everything we can, but we've come to a point where we can't go any further. I just don't know what to do. It's clear Pearl needs a doctor, a doctor of the mind, someone to counsel her and help her through it. Do you know anyone, David? I'm afraid this goes beyond anything or anyone I've come into contact with.'

David drew deeply on his cigarette, then stubbed the remainder out in the ashtray. He frowned, rubbing his chin, deep in thought. 'I'm not sure there's anyone like that in Secunderabad. Not much call for it I'd say, although sometimes I think some of the men need help with everything they've witnessed at the front.' He inhaled deeply. 'I think Bombay would be your best port of call.'

Carrie gasped. 'Bombay? But it's miles away. We'd have to pay for the doctor's train fare and even put him up in a hotel in Secunderabad

because I'm sure one visit won't be enough.' There's absolutely no point my asking Arnold for help. He hates it that Pearl's here and has already suggested I send her home. If he knew how ill she was I wouldn't stand a chance of caring for her here.'

'I think it's the only place you'll find the kind of doctor you need. There's no one here like that, I'm pretty sure of it, and unfortunately there are some charlatans in Secunderabad who have set themselves up as doctors because they know they got a captive clientele, silly women who pay them for doing not very much. No, it has to be Bombay. Leave it with me, Carrie. I'll investigate...oh, and don't worry about the money side of things. I'm sure we can come to some arrangement with the doctor. The important thing is to find a good one, someone who understands what she's going through.'

'David, I don't know how to thank you.'

David held up a hand. 'We need to get your friend better. Her fiancé gave his life for his country. It's the least I can do. And you never know,' he said, smiling. 'I might need your help one day.'

David Lawrence was as good as his word, not that Carrie doubted him for a moment. Within two weeks, Doctor Angus Fraser was on his way to Secunderabad from Bombay.

'That's not a very Indian name, David,' she said when they met one evening at the Secunderabad Club.

'No, but he was recommended by a friend in England who knew him when he practiced in Scotland. Apparently he settled in Bombay after marrying into an Indian family, unusual for the times I know. Unfortunately, his wife passed away after giving him a son and daughter, twins, only three years old.'

'Oh, that's very sad.'

'She caught the flu in her weakened state after giving birth and never recovered. If anyone knows how your friend is feeling, he does.'

Carrie shook her head sadly. 'She's not getting any better. Gita is sitting with her tonight. I don't know what I would have done without Gita. She has been a rock for me. She is the only person I can rely on in Secunderabad...and you of course.'

David looked uncomfortable and Carrie's heart jumped. 'Have I said something out of place?'

'No, of course not, but there has been talk. The grapevine here is very active. I know you don't like to be involved, but many are. People are saying you're much too close to her. I'm just concerned Bateman will hear all the gossip. The people who are doing the most spreading are in his circle, in my own unit, and it can be very destructive. I know what has happened between you and Bateman, Carrie, Dorothy filled me in. She was aware she was putting me in a difficult position; Bateman is in my unit,' they both glanced across at

Arnold who was holding court with some young soldiers, 'but she felt your safety was more important than the hierarchy of the unit. And of course she was correct.'

Carrie stared at him. Her stomach lurched and she had the sudden urge to kiss him, to place her lips against his and close her eyes. She imagined his strong arms around her, pressing her body to his and it made her gasp. David put his hand to her elbow to steady her, then swiftly lowered it again. There could be no impropriety between them, not even a light touch. 'Yes, yes, I'm fine. It's a bit warm in here that's all. I often struggle with the heat.'

'Do you need to go out for some air?'

'No. No thank you, I'd better go back to Arnold. He won't acknowledge my presence but if I'm not at least near him I'll hear about it later. David, thank you so much for all your help. I hope and pray Dr Fraser can help poor Pearl. I'm so worried for her.' She turned and walked towards Arnold, wishing with all her heart that the man she was walking towards was the one she knew she was in love with. Captain David Lawrence.

Within a week, Dr Angus Fraser was installed in a small, but neat and tidy hotel in central Secunderabad on a narrow alleyway leading off James Street. David Lawrence was unable to meet with him, his military duties had taken him to another station, but he had arranged for Dr Fraser to introduce himself by way of a visit to Carrie's Closet. Carrie was nervous about the meeting, and paced for an hour before his arrival. Gita put her hand on her arm and passed her a cup of tea to calm her nerves.

'You seem agitated, Carrie. Drink this and try to calm yourself. You'll be no help to anyone if you tire yourself.'

'But what if we don't like him, Gita? What if he's strict and harsh and doesn't understand why Pearl feels so ill? She won't thank me. When I said David and I had found a doctor to help her she was less than pleased, saying she didn't need a doctor and she would be alright if we left her alone. I won't pretend, I am very worried.' A moment later, the bell above the door chimed and a man who Carrie instantly knew was Dr Fraser bustled through the door.

The first thing she saw was his beard, ginger in colour and parted by a huge smile. He was a large man, tall with broad shoulders, and his copious hair was as red as his beard. Carrie smiled to herself. This was a man in need of a haircut.

'Mrs Bateman, I presume,' he said, his Scottish brogue unspoilt by his years in Bombay.

'Yes, Dr Fraser?' She held out her hand which was engulfed as his fingers wrapped around hers. 'Welcome to Secunderabad. We're nothing like Bombay I'm afraid.'

He laughed and his blue eyes twinkled. 'Nowhere is like Bombay,' he answered, and Carrie liked him instantly. He smiled at Gita who had brought him some refreshment. 'Thank you. This is very welcome. And who is this lady?' he asked, nodding politely to Gita as he accepted the tea she offered him

'This is Gita,' said Carrie. 'My right-hand woman...and dear friend.'

'And the lady in question?'

'Upstairs above the shop...in the apartment. She is...not dressed today. And...unbathed, I'm afraid.'

'Aye, well, bathing is the last thing on someone's list of things to do when one is grieving.'

Carrie felt her breath catch in her throat. 'I...I'm sorry, Dr Fraser. I understand you are only too aware of how that feels. I'm so very sorry.'

'Yes, yes, unexpected, of course. Unfortunately, my wife wasn't very robust. The influenza took her. And now I have two bonny children to raise.'

'You have ayahs, nannies for the children?'

'Shilpa's mother, the children's grandmother. And a young woman who comes to the house a few hours a day to help out. And me, of course. I make as much time for them as I can. I have my patients. I must still attend to them.'

'Of course.'

'And with that in mind I should meet the patient. What's her name, her first name?'

'Pearl.'

'Ah, a good Scottish name. From which part of London are you?'

'Whitechapel.' He nodded knowingly. 'Are you ready to meet her, Doctor?'

'Yes, I think she and I should have a chat. She knows I'm here?'

'Yes.'

'And she's not very happy about it?'

Carrie wrung her hands and inhaled nervously. 'No.'

'No surprise there. It happens more frequently than you would imagine. Take me to her.'

Carrie and Gita took Dr Fraser up to the floor above the shop and waited in the tiny lobby that led into the living room. They were both holding their breath, waiting to discover what Pearl's reaction would be when he joined her in the place that had become her sanctuary, her safe place away from a cruel and unfeeling world that had taken her beloved William from her.

It seemed to Carrie that Pearl now saw everything beyond her own space as dangerous, and everyone within it, the enemy. Her heart had been broken so decisively, with such force, there was nothing on earth

that could encourage that heart to be mended, or at the very least, to begin the healing process. Carrie also worried that if Pearl decided not to see Dr Fraser, to send him away without allowing him to try and help her, not only would his journey from Bombay to Secunderabad been a waste of his time, but also a blow to her savings, money she had put aside for their futures. She didn't want to think of it as a waste, she would do anything to help her closest friend, but she knew there was always a chance that her idea of finding a doctor for Pearl could fall on stony ground, and therefore her friend would never be healed and the future Carrie planned for them would never be achieved.

Carrie and Gita listened silently to Dr Fraser as he spoke to Pearl, his voice low and gentle, neither cajoling nor admonishing, simply speaking to her with compassion and understanding. After a few minutes they heard Pearl sobbing, her voice broken and distraught as she explained to Dr Fraser how William's death had shattered her, not just in body but in her mind, how their plans to be married had been destroyed because he had been killed, that she could never find forgiveness for whoever it was who had taken his life, and because of this she had sunk into the very depths of despair. Carrie swallowed hard as tears rolled down her cheeks. Gita put a hand on her arm.

'He will help her, Carrie,' she whispered. 'He will help her.'

Carrie nodded and bit her lip. 'I hope so.'



Chapter 31

As the weeks went by, life began to take on a steady rhythm. Carrie did her utmost to stay away from Arnold whilst at the same time being the dutiful wife he demanded. Each morning she would rise early and prepare John for either accompanying her to the shop or to spend time with his ayah, who Carrie now looked upon as a friend. Amrita was a young woman with her whole life ahead of her. Carrie often wondered how she would ever meet a husband, knowing how important it was in her culture that she married, because her life consisted of caring for her mother's younger children at home in their village, and caring for John at the bungalow. Gita assured her Amrita would be taken care of.

'Already her family are considering young men for her, Carrie. She does not need to meet them. He will be chosen for her.' This had sent shivers down Carrie's spine, and she hoped Amrita's family would take more care of her than Florrie and Arthur had of her when choosing the man with whom she would spend her life. She often wondered if they had known what kind of man Arnold was, that he thought nothing of beating a woman and had only derision for his mother, they would have let her leave with Arnold so gladly, but then her thoughts went to Florrie. Florrie was a pragmatist. Arnold was a solution, and Florrie knew another one wouldn't come along so easily. Added to that, Arnold had paid her a not insubstantial amount of money, according to him. She hoped the money she'd received had been worth losing her daughter and grandson for. She wondered what had happened to it as she shook her head and tutted to herself. She could only hope it had made their life easier than the one she had left.

'Will I ever see you again?' she said aloud, with only John secured in the parcel seat at the back, and the parched trees on the track out of the station to hear her as she drove the Sprite to the shop on James Street. 'And do you want to see me? Will you ever want to see me and my son, or am I just a reminder of shame that you don't want and would rather forget?'

A deep sadness overtook her, and as she got to the road leading to the centre of Secunderabad she turned in her seat to look at John. 'How could she give up being your grandmother so easily?' John's face broke into a beautiful, heart-stopping smile and Carrie leant back and stroked his cheek. 'She has missed so much. No amount of money could ever be worth losing you. One day they'll know, they'll know they shouldn't have done what they did and they'll regret it. It will

break their hearts, because you are an angel. And we will have to mend those hearts again.'



THE SHOP WAS ALREADY open when she arrived. Gita always rose early and was usually in the shop before Carrie. Carrie smiled as she opened the door and the little bell above it rang out her arrival.

'You love your job, don't you, Gita?'

Gita grinned and nodded. 'I thank the goddess Lakshmi every day for the opportunity she brought my way when you came into my life, Carrie. I am now thought of very highly in the village because I work for you. Villagers ask my opinion on everything, and everyone knows who I am. It has never been like this before. Before this, I was simply Radhav's wife. Now I am Gita, wise woman of the village, who has stepped outside of everything she thought she would be.'

Carrie had tears in her eyes as Gita spoke. 'Oh, Gita. I didn't know it meant so much to you. They need to know I couldn't have done it without you. You have changed my life too. I am honoured you're my friend.' She embraced the woman, noticing she seemed even thinner than usual. 'Gita. You've lost weight. Are you eating?'

Gita laughed and turned back to the racks of clothing where she was hanging new stock. 'Like a wolf with a catch, Carrie. I eat very well.' Carrie nodded, but a bud of anxiety grew in her chest. Gita took John from Carrie's arms and cuddled him.

'Dr Fraser is here.'

Carrie frowned. 'Already. He's very early today.'

Gita nodded and smiled. 'He is taking Pearl into James Street. It will be the first time she has left the shop in nearly two months. He wants her to spend Christmas Day with other people, although she has said she would rather be alone. She pushes it away when he suggests anything new.'

'Where is he taking her?'

'He said he is taking her shopping.'

'Shopping? Really?' Gita nodded. 'D'you think it'll be alright for me to go up to the apartment?'

Gita nodded again, and Carrie opened the door that led to the staircase to the first-floor rooms. When she got halfway up, she could hear Angus Fraser's gentle voice as he encouraged Pearl to step out of her safe place and venture out onto James Street.

'Now, Pearl, don't tell me you don't like shopping. I haven't met a woman yet who didn't love to trawl around every shop to find that very special thing, and then end up in the very first shop they went into.' Carrie stopped on the stair and smiled to herself. Here was a

man who knew women. 'We don't have to go far. You will take the lead, and when you want to come back to the apartment for a nice cup of tea, we come back.'

Carrie stepped up the rest of the staircase and joined them in the living room. Pearl was pale, yet Carrie noticed there was a slight flush to her cheeks and her eyes were bright. Carrie went across to her friend to embrace her, and to her relief, Pearl returned it.

'You look better, Pearl. Much better. I hear you're planning to go out today.'

Pearl nodded. 'Yes, but Carrie I've got so little to wear. I feel so frumpy in the clothes I brought from London. They're all so dark and heavy. I've been watching everyone out of the window, the bright colours and beautiful soft floaty fabrics. I can't go out in what I've got.'

Carrie sat next to Pearl on the sofa and took her hand. 'Pearl, sweetheart, you're living over a dress shop. Finding something to wear should be the last thing for you to worry about.'

Pearl turned her face to Carrie's shoulder as if hiding what she was saying from Angus Fraser. 'I've no money, Carrie. I can't afford the dresses you sell. I came here to work and I've done nothing for weeks, so I've earned nothing. I feel such a burden.'

Carrie glanced up at Dr Fraser and was surprised to see the expression on his face which was one of gentle sadness. 'But you will earn, when you're properly better. You can help me and Gita in the shop. You can start with a couple of hours and then increase them when you're ready. And as for being a burden, I won't hear of it,' Carrie chided her softly. 'You could never be a burden to me. You're my best friend and you always will be.' Pearl looked into Carrie's face and tears filled her eyes. 'I'll go downstairs and get you some things to try on. Would that be alright?'

As she left the apartment she turned to see Angus Fraser sit in the chair opposite Pearl and take her hand in his own, then reach up to tenderly wipe away a tear from her cheek with his thumb. It seemed such an intimate thing to do, something a man would do for a woman he admired, not a doctor to a patient. She was curious as to Pearl's reaction, but she simply smiled at him and lowered her eyelashes, and Carrie couldn't help wondering if something had happened between them. She hoped Fraser hadn't taken advantage of Pearl in her darkest moments, but she couldn't deny that Pearl had become a different person since his arrival.

Her recovery had been a very gradual thing. At first she had put up barriers, telling Carrie that she didn't need a doctor and that time was a healer. Carrie had agreed with her, but told her that Angus Fraser had been recommended to David Lawrence and was a well-respected

doctor in Bombay, and that if he could bring about Pearl's recovery faster then surely it was something worth considering.

'I don't want to forget William,' Pearl had said. 'I could never forget him, he'll always be part of my life even though he's not with me anymore.' She'd glanced up at Carrie, pleading with her eyes for her to understand.

'No one wants to take William's memory away from you, Pearl,' she'd said. 'He was your fiancé and you loved him. I know you still do, but you have a life in front of you, sweetheart, and I'm sure William would have wanted you to live it. I know how much he meant to you, but he would have wanted you to do what you could to get better. Live for him, Pearl. He was a brave boy who gave his life to his country so that you could continue without fear. It's time you did.'

Half an hour after Carrie had taken a selection of dresses to the apartment and Gita had helped her try them on, Pearl left the apartment for the first time in weeks. She had chosen a lemon-yellow dress that made her beautiful red hair flowing down her back glow like gold. A wide straw hat completed the outfit, and Gita had chosen some yellow buttoned pumps to match. Carrie had slipped Pearl some money in lieu of wages and she had smiled at Carrie gratefully.

'Treat yourself, Pearl,' Carrie said. 'Buy yourself a Christmas present. You deserve it.'

Pearl had clutched Carrie's hand and squeezed it. 'I'll never be able to thank you enough, Carrie, for what you and Gita, and Captain Lawrence have done for me. I'm ever so grateful.'

Carrie hugged her. 'I just want my Pearl back. That's all.'



THAT EVENING, WHEN Pearl had returned from James Street and Dr Fraser had returned to his hotel, Carrie went up to the apartment before leaving for the bungalow. There was a feeling that had stayed with her all afternoon and she knew she had to speak with Pearl about it. The look she had given Dr Fraser had become imprinted behind her eyes and she needed to be sure Pearl was safe and in her right mind, that she wasn't being coerced into something she would later regret. She tapped gently on the living room door and Pearl answered.

'Come in.' Carrie peeped around the door and Pearl laughed. 'Come in, Carrie. I thought it was you. I know your knock.'

Carrie nodded and went into the apartment, then went across to the tiny kitchen and poured a pitcher of water into the kettle and placed it on the stove. Tea always accompanied those moments in life which stayed in our memories, and for a reason she couldn't fathom, she felt this was going to be one of them.

‘How was your afternoon?’ she asked Pearl.

Pearl sunk into the sofa and became quiet. She was breathing steadily, as if measuring every breath, the distance between each inhale and exhale equal. ‘It’s the first time I’ve left the apartment for weeks. I was very nervous, but Alistair, I mean...Dr Fraser gave me the encouragement and safety I needed.’

‘What do you think of him?’ Carrie carried two cups and saucers steaming with fresh tea across to the occasional table between the sofa and the chair and sat down, leaning towards her friend, hoping, perhaps even praying everything was as it should be.

‘He’s very kind, Carrie. He has been very kind to me.’ She inhaled deeply. ‘The thing is, he understands the loss I experienced when William was killed. He lost his beloved wife, he adored her you know, and it’s how I felt about William. I think it’s what I needed, someone who had been through it.’ She leant forward and put her hand across Carrie’s. ‘Please don’t think I’m ungrateful. You have been a true friend, the only one who actually tried to help me when I was in my darkest despair. Even at home in Whitechapel, I couldn’t seem to make my family understand that I was wretched with grief. My mother said that I should grin and bear it because so many women had lost their husbands, and children their fathers; that I shouldn’t behave as though I was the only one who had lost someone. What she didn’t understand was that I was well aware of the devastation being felt by so many women and children in the country, but none of them knew William. Of course I understood, of course I knew that many hearts had been broken, but my heart had broken too, into so many pieces I thought it could never be mended.’

Carrie’s eyes had filled with tears and she squeezed her friend’s hand to show her she understood. ‘And is it healing, Pearl? Do you think it can be mended?’

‘Something happened to my mind, Carrie. It wasn’t just my heart that was broken. My mind became broken because of the unbearable pain I felt when I knew William had been taken from me and would never come back. It was like...it was like I’d been cast out into a storm so great I couldn’t see where I was going or where I would end up. Even in the quiet of this apartment, the safety of these four walls, it seemed so far outside of what I was feeling inside, like I was in my own hell. I don’t think I’ve ever been so frightened in all my life. And for a while I thought I wouldn’t survive. I would either die in my sleep or by my own hand.’

Carrie gasped. ‘No, Pearl. Never that. Please.’

Pearl patted her hand and leant back into the sofa. ‘It has passed.’ She smiled gently. ‘I’ve found some strength...from somewhere. I know I’ll never see William again, but the love we had was special,

and I'll never forget it. And I'll never forget him and how brave he was to put himself forward for his country. Dr Fraser said this is how I should remember him, as a brave soldier who chose his path. And actually, Carrie he did, didn't he? William chose to go and fight. He knew what could happen, he knew he might die. We talked about it, but I was so naïve about what was happening over there, I just didn't think it would happen to him. Dr Fraser thinks I suffered a kind of shock to my system, something I couldn't cope with, which was why I became ill.'

'But you're getting better, aren't you? You're feeling better.'

'Yes. Yes, I'm better. The grief I feel now...I think it's normal grief for someone I've lost. Dr Fraser gave me some breathing exercises to do and some stretching exercises. Even going out today was part of my recovery. He says I did very well.'

'What will happen when he goes back to Bombay?'

Pearl shrugged. 'I'll have to be strong. I'll come and work in the shop to give me a purpose. He says it's what I need, a purpose in life. He says we all do.'

Carrie nodded. 'He's right. We do all need a purpose in life. As difficult as it was when I had John I don't know what I would have done without him. He gave me a reason to carry on, in fact, he was *the* reason. I had to be strong for him, even with everything I've gone through with Arnold. Knowing John needed me got me through it.'

'He said I could go to Bombay for a holiday, that I could stay in his house and meet his children.'

Carrie stared at her. 'Is there more to your relationship than a doctor, patient one, Pearl? I was a little concerned. You seem so close.'

Pearl shook her head. 'No. There has been no impropriety. He is just one of the kindest people I've ever met. I feel...safe, when I'm in his company. He has become a good friend. Our loss of the ones who meant the most to us has strengthened our respect for one another. He loved his wife so much, Carrie, but he had to remain strong for his children. That must have been very difficult, perhaps even more so for a man because children always look to their mothers, don't they?' Carrie nodded. 'But they became his purpose, along with his practice and his patients.'

'Will you go to Bombay?'

Pearl smiled benignly. 'Maybe one day. Not yet. I'm not strong enough for such a journey, or to be thrown into another person's life. It was very kind of him to offer me some respite, but I'm not ready for it. He's going to stay until the New Year. His family in Bombay don't celebrate Christmas as we do, and his children are well looked after so he will stay to see me through the festive season, then he will return to his family.'

Carrie left her chair and sat next to Pearl on the sofa. She clutched her friend's arm, then put her head on her shoulder. 'I've got you back, Pearl, my lovely, wonderful friend. It's all I wanted.'

'And I'll never be able to thank you enough, or Captain Lawrence. How much must I owe him, Carrie? When will I ever be able to repay him?'

Carrie glanced up. 'Don't worry about that,' she whispered. 'It's not important. I'll see him tonight and I'll talk to him about it. Arnold and I are due to go to a dinner being held at the Secunderabad Club for one of the men in his unit, some sort of leaving do. For two pins I wouldn't go. I absolutely hate being dragged there and having to sit with Arnold pretending everything is as it should be. He likes to play the dutiful husband but I'm pretty sure most people know we don't have a real marriage. Anyway, I know there isn't anything to worry about as far as David's concerned. He was very willing to help us. David Lawrence is also a very kind man, a lovely man in fact.' She heard Pearl chuckle and she sat up. 'What?'

Pearl raised her eyebrows. 'And a very handsome man.'

Carrie grinned. 'Well, yeah, that as well.'

'Not that you'd noticed.' Carrie shrugged. 'Don't let him get away, Carrie. You've been through so much. I've learnt the hard way we have to take the opportunities that are sent our way. Life's too short to be holding back on anything. And I know you've got feelings for him. When you talk about him your voice changes.'

'Does it?' Pearl nodded, smiling and Carrie sighed. 'It doesn't make any difference how I feel. I'm married to Arnold Bateman and it seems as though it will have to stay that way. At least for now.'

Pearl shook her head. 'Why? You need to get out. You've got reasons. I don't know why you haven't done it.'

'It's not that easy. Where would I go? Arnold would make my life hell. And yes, I have the shop now, but it's not really mine. It really belongs to Dorothy, and if she returns things will change. I run the business as my own, and I'm saving like mad because one day, one day I will leave. I will go back to London, to Whitechapel, and I'll make sure me and John don't need to rely on anyone, but I don't have enough yet. I have a goal in mind, a ridiculous goal some might say, but it gets me out of bed in the morning. The more I work, the more I save, and the more I save the closer I am to achieving what I want. Whitechapel spat me and John out when we needed it most. I can't let it happen again.'

'So you will go back then?'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, and if you're still here you can come with me. There will always be a home for you with me, Pearl. You know that don't you?'

‘And what about Captain Lawrence?’

‘I don’t know,’ Carrie answered, shaking her head. ‘You’re right about my feelings for him, but I just don’t know.’

That evening Carrie accompanied Arnold to The Secunderabad Club for a leaving ceremony for one of the officers in his unit.

‘We’ll go in your car,’ he said. ‘Nice little thing that is. I don’t mind arriving in it.’

Carrie felt her hackles rise. ‘Dorothy didn’t give it to me for your benefit, Arnold. It’s meant for work. We should get another car or go by cart.’

‘Cart? I’m not turning up to the club in a bloody cart. You can if you want to. I’ll drive the car myself.’

‘No. You won’t. I’ll drive.’ The thought of Arnold sitting in the passenger seat beside her in the small car made her stomach turn, but she was determined he wouldn’t take control of the only thing she could call hers, at least until Dorothy returned from England. ‘Are you ready?’

He turned towards her, his white dress uniform would have been smart on anyone else, but on Arnold it just made him look even paler than usual. Carrie had long since realised there was very little that would make Arnold look smart, even though he was convinced he outshone every other soldier in the room, and he turned the glare of that light onto the young soldiers who had just joined the unit. ‘How do I look?’

She glanced at him as she pulled on her gloves. ‘Very smart, Arnold.’ She waited for him to comment on her silver-grey sequinned column dress that skimmed her ankles and the white feather in front of her headdress, but he said nothing as usual. Carrie shook her head with frustration.

‘Come on, let’s go.’

On the journey he asked her about Pearl.

‘When’s she going ‘ome? Out-stayed her welcome I reckon.’

‘She’s not going home. She’s been ill and she needs time to recover. Then she’s going to work in the shop for a while.’

‘Yeah, well I should think so. She needs to earn her keep. We’re not made of money.’

Carrie smiled to herself. No, we’re not, she thought. But I am.



THE SHOP HAD SURPASSED all their expectations. When Carrie had written to Dorothy to tell her how much it was earning every month, Dorothy had insisted Carrie begin a fund for herself.

I don’t need it, darling, she had written, but I do want you and John

to have a nest-egg. And honestly, Carrie, you're the one doing all the work. It sounds like you're doing a grand job too. Just make sure Gita is looked after. I've heard she puts in a lot of hours. It seems to be in her blood, working herself to the bone, poor thing. It might be time for her to take a step back when Pearl feels well enough to take over. I'm so sorry she's been so unwell, but glad you've found a solution. I knew David would come through for you...

Carrie had thought about nothing else since, that Gita was certainly not herself, yet she had stubbornly refused to rest even though Carrie had suggested it many times. She wondered if Dorothy was right, it was simply in her culture that she work until she dropped because she was apprehensive about what it would mean if she lost her job; that her family would suffer as a consequence. She needs time off, Carrie thought as she drove towards The Secunderabad Club, trying to block out Arnold's incessant self-important chatter. It will do her good to have some time to herself. I must make sure Arnold doesn't find out because he'll have her working back at the bungalow and she will not refuse because Gita doesn't know how to refuse anything.



Chapter 32

The mood in the club seemed rather sombre. Carrie had got past the point of worrying that the other wives barely acknowledged her; she knew she was seen as an aberration to the rest of the station. Even the Fishing Fleet ignored her. Strange though, she thought. When they come into the shop on their own without their friends they're as nice as pie.

She made her way to the edge of the room after taking a glass of sparkling wine from a tray. Arnold had instantly gone to the bar without a second thought for her, his usual behaviour when they mixed socially. It was almost like a game of chess; they both had their usual moves and accepted that the other would not be close. Carrie was glad of it. The last person she wanted to be close to was Arnold.

She glanced around the room at the other guests. Many of them were in little cliques, soldiers and their wives, some holding back while others were desperate to make their mark and become the Burra of the station, the Queen Bee of the mofussil. Carrie thought about when she was a scullery maid at Nightingale Lane, wishing she could be part of the beautiful set with their stunning clothes, clipped vowels and air of superiority. I've grown up, she thought. Now I know it means nothing. They're just like me. Cut them and they bleed, and make a lot more noise about it than my class would. Never again would she feel that someone was better than her simply because they had money. Carrie felt a warm feeling flow through her, a sense of knowing who she was and what she wanted. And she wasn't relying on a man to do it for her, to sit on his coat tails as he rose through the ranks in the military so she could boast about it to her friends. Everything she had now she could afford to buy herself. She had offered Dorothy a sum of money for the Sprite but Dorothy had refused, telling her that when she returned to Secunderabad they would go exploring together and Carrie could drive. Carrie accepted her generosity with good grace and took special care of the little car, somehow doubting Dorothy would return to the station.

She realised the way people at the station lived was unsustainable. No one could live like it forever. She had already been informed by Arnold that when John reached the age of seven he would be sent home to England to complete his education. It was true, she'd had to acknowledge. There were barely any children at the mofussil. There had been a couple of births recently, but certainly none older. Carrie was determined not to be separated from her son and this was at the

foremost of her mind. Arnold had tried to take everything from her, her confidence in her abilities, her dignity, and her friends, and he had not succeeded. And he certainly would not succeed in parting her from her beloved little boy.

She realised she had taken herself in mind, if not in body, away from The Secunderabad Club and back to the streets of Whitechapel. She wondered about that place. Had it changed? How were her parents whom she had not once heard from since she had been in India; a year in April. Christmas in Secunderabad would be the first festive season she had ever spent away from home and she wondered how it would be. Most years, in London, they had so little, but with the cook, Mrs Coyle's generosity they had always managed to have enough to eat. Pigeon pie had been a regular on the Dobbs' Christmas table, accompanied by mashed potato and some greens. There would also be jars of strange things purloined from the Stern's cupboard at 99 Nightingale Lane, delicacies that Mrs. Coyle said had been there a while and Carrie might as well take home with her. It had become almost a Christmas parlour game, with everyone trying to guess what might be in the jars and only the bravest of them attempting to taste what was inside. Carrie smiled to herself at the memory and was then startled out of her reverie by a voice interrupting her daydream.

'You look very amused at something, Mrs Bateman.'

The voice brought her back to the present. Her heart jumped when she saw who had spoken the words and her breath left her body.

'Captain Lawrence. David. How lovely to see you. How are you?'

'I'm well, Carrie, but more importantly, how is your friend? Pearl isn't it?'

She nodded. 'Pearl is on the mend thanks to Dr Fraser. He has worked wonders with her. She's more like the girl I knew.'

'I'm very glad to hear it. Grief can be a terrible thing.'

'I'm glad I've seen you, David. I wanted to speak to you about Dr Fraser's fee. And of course his expenses. Will you let me know how much we owe you?'

He smiled gently and caught her eyes with his. Carrie had the urge cry, why she didn't know, but his kindness and gentleness shone from him and she wanted more than anything in the world at that moment to be taken into his arms and held, to be kissed, to feel his hands in her hair as he drew her body closer to his. 'You owe me nothing, Carrie.'

'But...'

He shook his head. 'Please. Don't worry. It was my pleasure to help you. I know Dr Fraser is very pleased with Pearl's recovery...in fact, he has nothing but high praise for how hard she has worked to regain her former health, and for you, of course.'

‘You’ve spoken to him?’

‘Yes, and we have come to an agreement over his expenses. He intends to stay until after the Christmas period. He will stay at the station in my bungalow.’

‘Your bungalow?’

‘Yes, Carrie. I’m leaving Secunderabad immediately after Christmas to return to the front. This...get-together is for me.’

Her eyes widen and she gasped. ‘You’re leaving? Why?’

‘I’m to go to France to oversee another unit. Seems I’ve been too successful with my men here. I’m to go back where the men require more assistance. I just hope I can give it to them, poor devils.’

‘David...please don’t go.’

He laughed. ‘Carrie, it’s not something I have a choice in. Mahatma Gandhi’s visit is in the week between Christmas and the New Year and then I must leave. If I could stay, I would.’

Suddenly the gong sounded for everyone to be seated. David wandered towards the front of the ballroom and Arnold joined Carrie.

‘Why are you looking like that?’ he said. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Come on, we need to sit at our table. And please, try not to say anything stupid in front of my men. Best if you keep quiet I think.’

He put his hand roughly under her elbow and steered her towards the tables. Carrie felt like she was in a bubble, simply moving because she was being pushed. She sat with tears pricking under her eyelids. She hadn’t known the leaving dinner was for David. If she’d known she wasn’t sure she could have attended. Now she had to pretend everything was alright, that she was there simply as a guest, a bystander in the life of the mofussil, a bit-player in David’s life, when really she wanted to be the most important part.

Arnold’s impatience with her was palpable.

‘What the hell is up with you? Are you ill? Please don’t disgrace me again.’

Carrie took a deep breath. ‘I feel a little under the weather. Maybe I need some air.’

‘Can’t it wait? They’re about to make the speeches. You’re probably hungry. Hope you can wait an hour. These things can go on a bit.’

She sat like stone, listening to the speeches about David and how much he would be missed in the unit. Occasionally she glanced at him. He had an elbow on the table, his face cast downward, and would only look up when someone made a joke about him that the ladies had to pretend they didn’t understand. An hour or so later, dinner was served. Carrie picked at the food. As usual it was highly spiced until the cheese course when she felt she could eat something safely.

When dinner was over and a more relaxed mood had enveloped the gathering, Carrie whispered to Arnold that she needed some air and would go outside. He nodded impatiently, and she left the table with Arnold only vaguely acknowledging her leaving with a roll of his eyes. He didn't care, she knew. He was very busy discussing something with an extremely good looking, and rather effete young adjutant who had arrived in Secunderabad only the week before and seemed overwhelmed with the society he had been thrown into. She shook her head in disgust as she left the table, realising that the young man was probably Arnold's next target, but she also had to acknowledge that he seemed to be enjoying the undivided attention Arnold was giving him.

Outside, the air was still, with only the sound of the night birds as they roosted on the trees surrounding the club. Carrie looked back at the white building which looked almost ghostly in the increasing dusk, then wandered towards the small lake and sat on one of the benches. The scent of hibiscus and lilies hung in the air and she closed her eyes and breathed in the heady scent. It was a beautiful night, and Carrie sat silently, deep in thought, watching the water birds as they landed on the lake with a gentle whoosh and a brief flapping of wings. She was overwhelmed with sadness. Two of the people who had made her life bearable since she had arrived in Secunderabad were now lost to her. Dorothy had mentioned in her letters returning to India in the future, but Carrie was sure she would not. She was caring for her sister's children and she felt certain Dorothy only said it to placate her. She wondered if she would ever see her friend again.

And now David was leaving too. That she had fallen in love with him there was no doubt. He was everything she had ever wanted in a man, kind, gentle, strong, and utterly caring, and try as she might she could not push those feelings away. Every time she saw him she was aware of his nearness to her, his unique cologne, the lightness of his voice and the look in his eyes. He had an effect on her and she was undeniably attracted to him. She wondered if he had feelings for her, but it seemed an incongruous thought bearing in mind that after Christmas, he too would leave India. She sighed and swallowed the temptation to cry. If Arnold noticed he would not let her forget it and would certainly carp at her until he knew why, enjoying her distress.

Someone sat beside her and startled out of her thoughts. She turned slowly and stared at David, her heart beating wildly, hoping he couldn't read her mind.

'Life doesn't get any easier does it?' he said.

Carrie glanced back to the lake and shook her head. 'No. No it doesn't. And now you're going away to fight.' She turned to look at him. 'Are you afraid?'

He chuckled. 'You know, I'm not meant to say so. So many are giving their lives for their country. I've been at the front I know what to expect. I'm not sure if it makes it better or worse.'

'For better or for worse. Sounds like a marriage.'

'It is in a way. When you marry you tie yourself to another person, and promise to be by their side no matter what happens. Fighting for one's country is similar I suppose. Here, I've immersed myself into the culture of another country, while maintaining the rule of law of the one where I was born. I've stopped dissidents making trouble, arrested a few, but compared with what our men face at the front...it's incomparable.'

'And now you must go back.'

'Yes, there's no choice in the matter. If I could choose I'd stay here. With you.' His eyes met hers and she saw the deep sorrow he was feeling. 'I've never really been in love before. When the Fishing Fleets come over every season, my colleagues and their wives are intent on finding me a partner, but the girls who have been sent by their families seem only interested in bagging themselves a husband so they can climb the social ladder. You, Carrie. You don't care about that sort of thing do you?'

'Why would I? You must know where I come from. The class I've been brought up in is the one I've lived in all my life. I was born and raised in Whitechapel, David, not the leafy squares of London's upper echelon of society. Not Nightingale Lane, where I worked as a scullery maid before I came to India. I've known great hardship, experienced not having enough food to eat; been so hungry my stomach constantly growled and the only way I got away from it was when I went to sleep at night, that's if I could sleep. Most of the women here have no idea how that feels. I would imagine you don't know how it feels.'

'No, but I've known war, and I know the trenches. It gives a person a different perspective on life.'

She nodded. 'Yes. Yes, I expect it does.'

'And it makes you realise who is important in one's life, and you, Carrie, you have become very important to me. I...I wanted to tell you before I went away because I didn't know whether I would have the chance. I've...fallen for you. I've tried to push my feelings away because you're a married woman, albeit an unhappily married woman, but it makes no difference in our world. You're married to another man and that means you're unattainable.'

He reached for her hand. 'Carrie, I know this isn't right. You know it isn't right, but I can't deny the way I feel. Ever since I first saw you outside the train station in Bombay I had a feeling you and I were going to mean something to each other. You're a very special woman. I know how brave you've had to be, coming to a strange country,

bearing a child on an old ship...living with a man who clearly doesn't love you. Do you love him?'

She shook her head. 'No,' she said in almost a whisper. 'I don't know how much Dorothy told you...?'

'She told me everything.'

'I don't want anything to happen to him. I have no respect for him, not because of the choices he's made, it's likely he can't do anything about that, but he could have treated John and me so differently. I know I made a mistake when I allowed Johan to lead me on, but I was so young, not just in years, but in experience. I didn't know anything about life, nothing at all really. Arnold has used it against me and made me feel like nothing, a no one, someone to look down on. The thing is, I adore John, and I wouldn't change a thing. I love him with all my heart. Arnold's never known that kind of love, never felt that depth of feeling for another human being. I don't think it's his fault.'

David shook his head slowly. 'I think you're being very kind to him.'

Carrie shrugged and released her hand from his. She turned towards the lake and watched the birds fly in a V formation across the silvery shimmer of the water, constantly moving, never still, the lights from the buildings twinkling in the dark. 'What's the point of feeling bitter, of wanting to get some sort of revenge?' She turned and looked at him. 'I have felt hatred for Arnold. I have known the depths of despair since I became his wife and travelled to Secunderabad. I could have found a place in my heart to like him if he had just treated me with kindness and a little respect. It wouldn't have taken much to turn it around, but Arnold hates women and this fuels the way he treats us. I cannot allow that behaviour to change the person I am. I've never deliberately set out to hurt anyone but I've wanted to hurt Arnold, more than you'll ever know. I haven't acted on those feelings and I don't want to ruin his life. I just don't want to be in it and I don't want him in mine and John's.'

David leant towards her. He looked deep into her eyes and she felt lost in their depth, the richness of colour, velvety brown, the kindness and his attraction to her flowing from them. He put a hand under her chin and pulled her closer, then pressed his lips gently against hers. Carrie closed her eyes and was transported into gentleness and desire. He pulled her closer and she found herself wanting more, needing the closeness, the love and the longing, feelings denied her since she had become Arnold's wife.

Their kisses became more urgent, their need for each other paramount, until David reluctantly pulled away. 'You feel as I do.' She nodded and he smiled. 'I have hoped and wished and prayed that you would, not knowing whether I should make my feelings for you open,

to show you that my love and desire for you is real.'

She inhaled deeply, then sighed. 'But you're going away and I'm still married, David. How am I to overcome that? Arnold will not let me go, and you, you must protect yourself from ridicule. You have a position of authority and now you are being sent to lead a new unit of men who will look up to you. I have made one mistake in my life where I allowed a man to lead me on then leave me when I needed him most. I've shouldered scorn and mockery from those who should have supported me and understood what I was going through. I cannot go through that again, and I can't allow you, a good man, to put himself in danger. You are free, free to do whatever you wish, with whomever you wish. I am not free, David, and if Arnold thought you and I had feelings for each other, believe me when I tell you he will not rest until he brings us both down.

He pulled her close again and kissed her. 'Hush,' he said. 'I know, I know all of that, but if I survive the war, Carrie, will you wait for me? Please say you will.'

'Yes, David, of course I'll wait for you. I can't imagine loving another man, or feeling for another man the way I have felt for you. I don't want anyone else. Just you, David. Just you.'

He kissed her again and smiled. 'This...weight I've been carrying around with me has pulled me down, made me morose because I wasn't sure if I'd got it wrong, if I was hoping for something I couldn't have, whether the love I have for you would be reciprocated. Can we meet? Somewhere private. A hotel? Before I leave. I want you, Carrie, more than you'll ever know.'

Carrie bit her lip. 'I want to, David. I want you, but...I'm married. If Arnold were to ever find out...I don't know what he would do. He has already tried to make my life unbearable, and it's only because of Gita and Dorothy's friendship that I've been able to be strong. I think we must wait, wait until I'm free of Arnold, and you're free of your duties to our country.' David looked crestfallen until Carrie took his hand and pressed it against her heart. 'I promise I will wait. Whatever happens from now, from this moment, I will wait for you, David.'



FROM A DARKENED ROOM at the back of the Secunderabad Club, Arnold Bateman stood at a window looking out over the lake. He held a lit cigarette down by his thigh so that the burning tip would not be seen in the darkness by two people sitting on a bench below, thinking they were unobserved. He watched as Captain David Lawrence leant towards his wife, the woman he had paid for and given a home, and kissed her, seething with uncontrolled anger as she responded. As

Carrie took David's hand and placed it against her breast, he hardened his jaw and ground his teeth in anger, then snuffed out the cigarette with his fingers, barely acknowledging the pain.

‘Got you,’ he murmured. ‘Now you’ll pay.’



Chapter 33

Gita was ill. Carrie had found her collapsed in the shop when she had arrived first thing, and she had insisted Dr Fraser take a look at her even though Gita protested she was alright and didn't need help. Carrie hadn't listened to her protests and had immediately locked the shop and driven Gita home. They passed vegetable markets, stalls selling lengths of fabric and accoutrements for home sewing, tables offering pieces of leather, some made into belts; the calls of the sellers fading as they left the commercial sector and got closer to the countryside. As they neared Gita's village the landscape became more rural, dry and dusty, with skeletal trees lining the dirt tracks leading to a collection of low housing consisting of shacks rendered with clay and roofed with bricks and reeds.

'Am I in the right place, Gita?'

Gita opened her eyes which were rheumy with exhaustion and half-covered with heavy lids that wanted to stay closed. 'Yes, Carrie. It is the house with the little garden in front. We are the only ones to do it. It is a Western thing I know, but a garden is so important to me.'

Carrie glanced across to her, her face etched with concern. I should have been tougher with her, she thought. I should have made her rest even when she resisted. Now look what's happened.

'You will rest, won't you, Gita? You will do as Dr Fraser said, stay off your feet, spend some time in bed and be good to yourself?' Gita nodded. 'I will check, you know. I will speak to your husband and daughter and tell them what the doctor said. I don't want to see you at the bungalow either.'

'But the sahib...'

'Never mind about him. I'll make sure he understands what's happened. If he tries to force you back to work at the bungalow tell your husband to come and see me.' Gita nodded again. She barely had the strength to move her head so Carrie was sure she couldn't do anything else no matter how much she wanted to do it. 'And don't worry about money.' Gita's eyes opened again and she stared at Carrie sadly. 'I know you need it and you will have it. Just don't tell the sahib, alright? And make sure you put enough away for medicine. If you don't have enough please tell me. You need the medicine Dr Fraser spoke about.'

'So I must lie,' she whispered.

Carrie swallowed hard, knowing this was something she shouldn't advise Gita to do, and that someone as honest and loyal as Gita would

find almost impossible, but with Arnold who bore no excuses from anyone, there was no choice. 'On this occasion...I'm afraid we might have to. I'll try and keep him from you and your husband, I won't mention what's happened today, but unfortunately he seems to have a way of finding things out. How I don't know, he just does.'

Gita directed her to a small, square hut. It was modest and sparse in its construction, but even from the outside Carrie could see it was a home, one that was loved and cared for. At the front was a handkerchief sized patch of scrub where a narrow path had been fashioned out of bricks, leading to the front door.

'I am able to go in from here, Carrie,' Gita said.

Carrie raised her eyebrows. 'I'm sure you are, but I'm going to take you in. Wait there and I'll help you out of the car.' She went around to the passenger side and opened the door, placing a hand under Gita's elbow. The bone was sharp underneath her skin, and Carrie could see Gita's emaciated arm through the fabric of her jacket sleeve. Gently, she pulled Gita to her feet and walked her slowly into the little house.

Inside, it was dark and cool. There was a collection of mismatched furniture and a table pushed up against one of the walls. On the table were tiny ornaments, some photographs of Gita's daughter's wedding, and a shrine to Vishnu. At the far end was an opening covered with a piece of cloth. It reminded Carrie of the scullery in her parent's home and she smiled to herself.

'Where is your bedroom, Gita?' Gita pointed to the cloth and Carrie walked her across and pulled it aside. In the tiny room, no more than a few feet wide, was a bed covered in colourful fabric and some handmade cushions. Carrie settled Gita on the bed and lifted her feet, covering her with the fabrics. 'Please rest now, Gita. Try and sleep. I will get the medicine you need for now and have it sent to you. Would you like some water?' Gita nodded and Carrie went into the main room and looked for a kitchen area.

'We cook outside,' said Gita. Carrie went outside to the back of the house and found a cooking area where there was a pitcher of water and some metal cups. She poured some water into one of them and took it into Gita who drank it gratefully.

'Where is your husband?' Carrie asked her.

'He works for vegetable farmer today, delivering vegetables to the shops in Secunderabad.' Carrie nodded. 'And your daughter?'

'She is visiting her husband's relatives in Hyderabad. She will be back in the village tomorrow night.' Carrie nodded again and ran her hand across Gita's forehead, praying that it was just exhaustion that ailed her friend and nothing more. 'Please, Carrie, go back to the shop. I will wait for my husband to come home. He must cook tonight.' A

little smile appeared across her face and Carrie smiled with her.

‘Will it be the first time?’ Gita nodded, still smiling, then sleepily closed her eyes and turned her face to the wall.



Chapter 34

Christmas advanced on them with great speed. Carrie spent more and more time in the shop, and thankfully Pearl was now well enough to help. The customers liked her down-to-earth manner, and her can-do attitude. Carrie was relieved to see the old Pearl.

‘Are you enjoying yourself,’ Carrie asked her on Christmas Eve.

‘Y’know, Carrie, my whole working life since the age of fourteen I’ve worked as a maid, first as a tweeny, then worked my way up to room maid. I’ve slaved over ranges, cleaning them, blacking them, and polishing them to a shine which has taken hours. I’ve set fires for them upstairs so the poor things wouldn’t feel the cold, and I’ve served at special occasions when it was as much for the guests to do just to say thank you, and often they didn’t. I’ve never felt as much satisfaction from work as I do here. It’s...it’s a different world. And the way you’ve decorated the shop. It’s so beautiful. I think you learnt something at Nightingale Lane. Maybe it did us both a service.’

Carrie nodded. ‘You’re not wrong, Pearl. I learnt about quality, and how less of a thing is often better than having too much of it. There’s just enough glitter in here to make the shop sparkle from the outside to draw customers in. There’s no colour because it would compete with those dresses we got from Paris. And it all looks lovely.’

Pearl fingered the sequined fabric on one of the mannequins. ‘They are bright aren’t they? I never would have thought women would wear anything like this. I bet they’re not in London, what with the war ‘an all.’

‘Well, some of them are. I doubt the Sterns and their high-society friends are affected by the war.’

‘I got a letter from me mum. No one’s been called up yet, so Johan is probably still working for Mr Stern.’

‘That won’t last. They’re dropping like flies on the front which means they’ll begin the call-up shortly. It can’t go on forever, can it? There won’t be any young men left.’

‘No, but there’s still the older ones. Once all the young ‘uns have been called up they’ll start conscripting the married men. At least, they will if the war carries on.’

Carrie pulled a face. ‘So much for the war being over before last Christmas. Got that wrong, didn’t they?’

‘Yeah, they did.’

Carrie dropped her gaze, then looked up at Pearl, wondering if she should say anything. ‘How are you now, Pearl, y’know...about...’

Pearl looked wistful and shrugged slightly. 'Good and bad days. I lost the love of me life, but...well, you've been so good to me, and Gita was so kind. It helped me get over the very dark times. I didn't expect losing William to affect me like it did. It was like I was in a cloud, y'know, like the peasoupers we get in London. The trouble with this one was it was only hanging over me, following me around even in the apartment. It wouldn't let me be until...'

'Dr Fraser?'

Pearl smiled and began rearranging the shoe closet at the back of the shop. 'Yes, Dr Fraser was the one who pulled me back over the line. He's a very wise man, and has been very kind to me. I'll never forget what you and him have done for me. Don't know what would have happened to me if I'd stayed in Whitechapel. Might have ended up in one of those asylum places, y'know like...what's it called, The Bethlehem Hospital? Sounds so nice, dunnit, but I'm pretty sure it isn't.'

They both shivered, then laughed. 'Hark at us. It's Christmas Eve and we're talking about asylums.'

'Well, if you stay with Arnold Bateman too long you'll probably end up in one as well. We'll be all girls together and cause 'em some havoc.' They both threw their heads back in laughter. 'And Florrie can come and visit. She'd love that.'

'Very funny. I can assure you she wouldn't. I'd never see her again.'

'You might not see her again anyway.'

'No,'

'How d'you feel about that? She did the dirty on you didn't she? Can't get away from that?'

'Yeah, well. She had her reasons. She was ashamed of what I'd done and couldn't bear the thought that our community might be talking about us behind our backs. And she saw it as another mouth to feed, and me with no job. There's no way I could have kept on working. All about money, see. I might have understood it a bit more if she'd picked someone who wasn't leaving the country, but she was determined to get rid of the problem. And she did.'

'My mum thought it was terrible, what she did. Less bothered that you were in the family way. She said it happened all the time and she didn't know what Florrie was thinking. She didn't even ask who the father was.'

Carrie nodded. 'Florrie's someone who cares too much about other people's opinions.'

'What about your dad? He couldn't have wanted you to go surely?'

'No, he wouldn't have wanted it. But what he wanted never got spoken about. It's me mum who makes all the decisions in that house,

and I'm pretty sure Elsie was glad to see the back of me.'

'You're alright now aren't you, Carrie? Even with old grumpy knickers.'

'I'm alright because you're here, and because I have John.'

'And David Lawrence.'

Carrie's head snapped up. 'What?'

'Oh, come on, Carrie. It's obvious you're in love with him. And who wouldn't be? He's very handsome.' Pearl started dancing slowly around the room as though she was holding someone to her. 'And a captain, and rich, and...'

'Going to the front.'

Pearl stopped dancing and frowned. 'Oh no. When?'

'After Christmas. He's got to go back. No choice in the matter.'

Pearl went across to Carrie and put her arms around her. 'You're heartbroken. You must be. You and him, you could have had a life together when you got rid of that bastard. You can see what he feels for you. It's written all over his face.' She held Carrie at arms' length. 'Can't you go with him?'

'To the front?' Carrie cried.

'To London. Back home. To wait for him.'

'Like you did?'

Pearl sighed, her arms dropping to her sides. 'I know what you're saying, and I would never want you to go through what I went through when William was killed, but David's a Captain. He won't be in the same position as William was. He's got a better chance. William was unlucky.'

'Captains get killed, Pearl, just like anyone else. If he survives it'll be a miracle.' She sighed and gave Pearl a watery smile. 'I've promised to wait for him.'

Pearl grinned. 'I'm so glad,' she said. 'It'll give him something to survive for. You and John.'

Carrie took a deep breath. 'I'm still married, don't forget. And if we're to be together it's something I'll have to attend to, and if I know anything about Arnold Bateman it won't be an easy task.'



CHRISTMAS DAY WAS A quiet affair in the Bateman household. Arnold was off-duty and spent most of the day getting steadily drunk. Carrie didn't mind. She had already planned to visit Gita in the morning and take some gifts for her and her family, then to Amrita's mother's house so John could spend some time with her children. She left early, knowing that the kind of Christmas children usually experienced back in England would not be forthcoming for John, and

Carrie was relieved that at nearly ten months old, he didn't understand why Christmas is such an important festival.

For lunch, she and Pearl had planned to eat out at a small restaurant on James Street, then join the festivities at The Secunderabad Club in the late afternoon. Carrie had warned her it probably wouldn't be the usual Christmas fare.

'What's usual Christmas fare?' Pearl had asked, laughing. 'Eel pie and tripe with a bit of cabbage if we're lucky? Anything's got to be better than that.'

'Yeah, it was a bit like that, wasn't it, even with Mrs Coyle sending us home with stuff from the pantry.'

'Stuff no one wanted to eat, you mean. What the 'ell's a devilled egg for goodness sake.'

Carrie collapsed into giggles shaking her head. 'I don't know. We were lucky to get one from a hen, never mind one from a devil.' They had both laughed as they reminisced, but something inside each of them was left pining for the life they knew before, even with all its difficulties.

After lunch, when she got back to the bungalow with John, Arnold was dressing. He came out of his bedroom wearing his dress uniform. Carrie looked surprised.

'Are you not allowed to wear civvies even on Christmas Day?'

'Why would you want me to wear civvies? Like a soldier don't you?'

Carrie looked at him, a frisson of fear uncurling in her chest. 'I'm sorry, Arnold, I don't know what you mean. I just thought as it's Christmas Day, a public holiday, you would be able to enjoy the day without wearing your uniform.'

'Any man with a modicum of dignity will wear his uniform any day of the week, particularly when he's with his superiors. They'll all be wearing their dress uniforms, even Captain David Lawrence.'

Carrie's breath caught in her throat. He knows, she thought. Oh, my God, he knows. She swallowed down her fear and picked John up from where he was sitting on the rug. Her eyes went to Arnold. He was drunk, heavily so, and she knew better than most what he was capable of when he'd been drinking. She prayed she was right when she assumed he wouldn't touch her when she was holding her little boy. Arnold's lips curled as he eyed her from under half-closed eyelids.

'Think you've got one over on me, don't you?'

'I'm sorry, Arnold. Why would you think that?'

He leapt across the room and held a shaking finger up to her face, almost touching the tip of her nose. The whisky on his breath smelt sour and Carrie exhaled as he got near and tried not to face him. 'The reason I think it, lady, is because I saw you, I saw you, and 'im.

Snogging 'is face off, weren't yer.'

Carrie's stomach rolled. She tried to look away, to get away, but he grabbed her arm. 'Don't walk away from me, Carrie Dobbs. You're no better than you should be. I saw you, and 'im with his hands all over you. You're a slut, always were and still are.'

Carrie's eyes narrowed and she pulled her arm away. 'And what about you, Arnold. What would you call yourself, eh?' He pulled his hand back and delivered a stinging slap against her cheek. Carrie managed to stay on her feet but John began to cry. 'What a man you are, if that's what you call yourself. That you would strike me while I'm carrying a child. You're no man, Arnold Bateman, at least not one I ever wanted to be married to. One day...one day I'll be free of you and it will be the happiest day of my life.'

Arnold stepped back, fastening the collar of his dress jacket as though nothing had happened and sniggered. 'Well, Mrs Bateman, I wish you lots of luck. More shame heaped on you. As if you don't have enough on your head already. By the way, I want you to drive me to the club. It'll look good for me to be seen in my wife's car being chauffeured by you.'

'No. No, Arnold. I'm taking Pearl with me. You can make your own way.'

'Are you going against me,' he yelled making John cry even harder.

Carrie nodded. 'That's right. I am. You'll stay away from me and my son. If you don't I'll tell everyone what you get up to on your nights off.'

Arnold shrugged and smirked. 'And you think they'd believe you? A tart like you.'

'There's no smoke without fire, Arnold. You remember that.' She turned away from him, trembling; her whole body rigid with anger and fear. That he should hit her while she was holding John said everything about him.

In the bedroom she took one of John's muslins and soaked it in the pitcher of water, then held it against her face which smarted with pain. She knew by taking the blow and standing her ground meant she had received the full force of the blow, but she had been determined that he would not knock her down as he had before. And there was John. She looked at him in his cot, playing happily with the toys Gita had given him. Amrita would arrive at the bungalow soon and she wanted to be ready to leave. When she saw Carrie's cheek she would know what had happened and that would mean it would without doubt get back to Gita, the last thing Carrie wanted.

She had a strip-wash, then applied some makeup as Gita and her daughter had shown her, to conceal the angry mark on her cheek, the

stamp of Arnold's hand. By the time Amrita arrived Carrie was ready.

'Will you stay the night, Amrita? Would that be alright? I might stay at the apartment this evening.'

Amrita smiled. 'Of course, madam. That is not a problem. I hope you enjoy yourself at your special festival.' Carrie smiled and nodded, then left the bungalow, thinking that since Arnold had been drinking all day and would certainly drink that evening, enjoyment was the last thing on her mind.

When Carrie and Pearl reached The Secunderabad Club the party was in full swing. Carrie pulled the Sprite up in the small forecourt and switched off the engine. As she made to get out of the car Pearl stopped her.

'Hold on, Carrie.' Carrie stared at her. 'What's wrong with your face?'

Carrie's hand flew like a reflex to her face. 'What?'

'That.' She pointed to Carrie's cheek. 'Where your hand's trying to hide it.' Pearl waited with raised eyebrows. 'He hit you didn't he?' Carrie pressed her lips together and lowered her face, then nodded. 'Why?'

'Because he saw me kissing David Lawrence.'

Pearl drew in a breath. 'Oh, Carrie. That was a bit careless. How did that happen?'

'It must have been the other night, here at the club, when I found out David was leaving. I came out for some air and he followed me. It was silly I know, but...I think David thought it would be our only chance to spend some time together. I didn't mean for it to happen.' She paused, wondering if she should tell Pearl what David had asked her. 'He asked me to go to a hotel with him.' Pearl's mouth dropped open. 'I said I didn't think it was right, but I wanted to, Pearl. I really wanted to.'

Pearl put her hand on Carrie's arm. 'Course you did, but you did the right thing. The way you feel about Arnold is understandable, but you're still married to him. A kiss is one thing, but...giving yourself like that to someone.' She looked hard at Carrie. 'It's different, isn't it? More important.' Carrie nodded. 'And if he loves you as much as he says he does, he'll wait for you. And Arnold's a bully and he doesn't mind using his fists. I dread to think what he'd do to you if he thought you'd slept with Captain Lawrence.'

'I know exactly what he'd do. It's not the only reason I didn't agree to meet David. I do know the trouble it would cause, of course, but I was thinking about him too. If his superiors found out it would ruin his career. I don't want to be responsible for that.'



INSIDE, THE BALLROOM was decorated in the typically Victorian way, with huge Christmas trees in each corner, adorned with baubles and candles, and swathes of tinsel hung like bunting from wall to wall.

‘This is beautiful,’ breathed Pearl. ‘Like fairyland.’

Carrie turned and smiled and grabbed Pearl’s hand, pulling her across to a table. ‘Let’s sit here. We can watch people dancing.’

‘Watch them,’ cried Pearl. ‘I want to be one of them, and so do you. Let’s show these toffee-nosed sods how to have a good time.’ Carrie threw her head back and laughed, so delighted to have Pearl with her.

When she was with Pearl she felt safe, a feeling she hadn’t had in a long time. She remembered the day she’d married Arnold and watched Pearl walk out of the pub, making her way back to Nightingale Lane, thinking she would never see her beloved friend again. I am fortunate, she thought. Things are hard, but I didn’t know Pearl and I would be together again, yet here she is, my best friend in all the world. My sister, my soul-mate; the best, most caring friend anyone could ever have. With her and John I know I can survive. I *will* survive. Everything. Arnold can do his worst, throw everything at me, but they’ll still be with me, and right now, apart from David, they’re all I need.

Carrie inhaled a deep breath, feeling relaxed after the events of the afternoon, until she felt eyes on her, her senses telling her she was being observed. She turned and there was Arnold, surround by the unattached men in his unit, his eyes boring into her back. His gaze turned to flint, narrowing as her eyes met his, and she turned away.

‘You alright, Carrie? Pearl asked as she caught Carrie’s expression. She lifted her chin and looked over Carrie’s shoulder to where Arnold was holding court. ‘Oh,’ she said, her face hardening. ‘Forget him. He doesn’t deserve to have you and John. I can only hope that one day he gets what he does deserve.’ Suddenly, she stuck her tongue out.

Carrie was astonished. She put her hand across her mouth to stifle her laughter. ‘Did I just see you stick your tongue out at Arnold?’

‘Yeah, childish, ain’t I?’

‘Oh, Pearl I love you. You’re so funny.’

‘Yeah, but I can get away with it. He wouldn’t dare.’ She pulled a face over Carrie’s shoulder then patted her hand. ‘Drinks, I think. Gin and It for me. How about you? The same?’ Carrie nodded and watched as Pearl disappeared into the crowd at the bar.

Arnold appeared in front of her, looking in Pearl’s direction. ‘Your friend thinks she’s clever, don’t she?’ Carrie said nothing, but

continued staring ahead. 'You tell her if she does that again I'll wipe it off her face.'

Carrie lifted her head slowly. 'I'd like to see you try that.' She allowed a small smile to play around her lips and Arnold walked away, scowling.

'What did he want?' asked Pearl as she put the drinks on the table and sat down.

'Just trying to be clever.'

'He's got a long way to go before then, that's for sure.'

'Yeah, well.' Carrie took a sip of her drink and stared at Pearl.

'What?'

'How would you feel if me and John moved into the apartment over the shop with you?'

Pearl's mouth dropped open and her face shone with happiness. 'Oh, Carrie, I would love it.' Her expression suddenly changed. 'But what about Arnold? Leaving your husband. It's not done is it?'

'It's not done in London, but we're not in London, are we? Haven't you noticed, Pearl? Some of the rules are different here, at least that's how it feels. And the thing is, the reason we don't do things is because men have told us it's not right, and because we're worried about what people will think. That's why I'm here and not back in Whitechapel, after all, because Florrie was ashamed of me and what I'd done. She was terrified it would be found out by the people who live around us that I'd got a bun in the oven, knocked up by a member of the Jewish community no less, someone I worked for and someone I was supposed to look up to. If you met Dorothy you'd know things are changing for women, especially in Western countries, maybe not so much here. You've heard of the suffragettes haven't you?'

Pearl's eyes widened. 'God, she's not one of them, is she?' Carrie nodded. 'Oh, Carrie. They're always in trouble over something. What about that woman, Emily something. Ran out in front of a horse at the Derby and was killed. Why would she do that?'

'Emily Davison.'

'You know about her?'

'Dorothy knew her.'

'No!'

'Yep. Dorothy was a breath of fresh air here. When I first met her I thought she was like the others, but definitely she isn't. She even took on the Burra of the mofussil.'

'The Burra. What's that?'

'It's like the Queen Bee of the society at the military station. Ours here is Lady Mabel Dimmock.' She glanced across the room. 'Look, Pearl, that's her over there.'

'What the big one with the pasty face and the funny headdress?'

Carrie giggled. 'Sush, yes, that's our Burra.'

'But why would anyone think she's head of anything? Look at what she's wearing. Looks like some curtains my mum had up at the windows years ago. Bet she's never been to the shop. Well, I know she hasn't. We'd never sell a rag like that.'

Carrie grinned. 'No we wouldn't.'

'You should challenge her.'

'Me? No thanks. I've got enough on me plate. I want to leave the bungalow without Arnold knowing, when he's on duty. I'll just pack our bags and go. I've got nothing else there, and it's not like Gita's working there now.'

'How is she?'

Carrie looked concerned. 'Better, I think, but not out of the woods. I hope it's only exhaustion she's suffering from and nothing worse. I couldn't bear it, and neither will her family.'

'She's a good 'un, isn't she?'

'She's been like a mother to me.'

Pearl glanced at Carrie, realising how much she must have missed her family. 'You'll see them again, Carrie.'

'Will I? What if they don't want to see me?'

'Why wouldn't they want to see you? You're a married woman, you've got a child and you run a business. Won't they be proud?'

'Not when I tell them I've walked out on my husband.'

'So, don't tell them.'

Carrie grinned. 'It's funny isn't it? It feels like we can do anything, just because we don't have the matriarchs of Whitechapel looking over us.'

'No,' said Pearl. 'We've got 'er.' She lifted her chin towards Mabel Dimmock and burst out laughing. 'Shall we have some fun?' She opened her bag and sprayed perfume from an atomiser on to her wrists, straightened her feathered headdress and got up.

'Pearl,' Carrie cried, trying to stop her.

Pearl giggled and walked across the ballroom to where Mabel was sitting. She curtsied low in front of her and introduced herself. Carrie watched as Mabel flushed, then held out her hand as Pearl spoke to her, inclining her head in deference. Mabel, clearly delighted by the flattery smiled charmingly until Pearl turned and pointed in Carrie's direction. Mabel immediately drew her hand away and turned her head. Her husband flapped his hand towards Pearl as if to shoo her away. Carrie averted her eyes as a giggling Pearl returned to the table.

'Oh, my goodness, she doesn't like you does she? She was like putty in my hands until I mentioned your name.'

'Pearl, you're awful, but thank you. It's put everything into

perspective. All they care about is status.'

'Let's enjoy ourselves, Carrie. We deserve it.'

They danced to every tune the band played, joined in with the Charleston, and Foxtrotted together around the ballroom. All eyes were on them, but they didn't care. When they'd exhausted themselves they fell into their seats, holding hands and laughing. A few moments later Arnold sat at the table opposite Carrie, his face etched with anger.

'You need to go home. You and 'er, you're making shows of yourselves.'

Carrie leant forward in her seat, her fear of him having lifted and drifted away like a black cloud. 'Go away, Arnold. It's none of your business what I do?'

'It's very much my business. I'm your husband.'

'You're her what?' said Pearl, taking a swig from her drink and looking over his shoulder.

Arnold blanched. He seemed wrong-footed for a moment, then rose from the chair and went quietly back to the bar, his shoulders slumped. 'That told 'im.'

'I'll have to leave now won't I?'

'Yeah, and it's the best thing you can do. Just don't leave it too long.'

Just before the Christmas Party came to a close, David arrived along with Angus Fraser.

'Oh,' said Carrie. 'I wasn't expecting to see them here tonight.'

'Dr Fraser said he had a meeting about a visit of someone important.'

'I expect he meant Mahatma Gandhi. David's spent a great deal of time organising his visit. I wonder what he wanted with Dr Fraser, though. Has he mentioned anything to you?'

Pearl shook her head. 'Well, he wouldn't, would he? I'm hardly important.'

David and Angus went to the bar, and Carrie noticed they seemed to make a point of not acknowledging her and Pearl's presence.

'It's probably for the best, Carrie,' said Pearl. 'After what happened to you tonight. You don't want to give Arnold an excuse for more of that.'

Carrie shrugged and nodded. She had to agree with Pearl, but her heart was telling her something different. 'Shall we go?'

'Yeah, good idea,' answered Pearl. 'We can talk about when you'll leave the bungalow and move into the apartment. I can't wait.'

Carrie was quiet on the way back to the apartment and Pearl kept glancing at her.

'You alright, Carrie?' she asked her, frowning.

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, I'm fine.' She glanced at Pearl and smiled. 'Tired I s'pose.'

'You will move out, won't you? Don't let him stop you.'

'I'm a bit worried about it. If he thinks I'm going to leave he'll do everything he can to stop me.'

'Then don't do anything to make him suspicious. Just carry on as normal. You could bring a few things over at a time, y'know, in the car every morning. A few drawers of clothes, some of John's bits and pieces. He'll never notice.'

'No, no, you're right. It's a good plan. I'll start on Monday, bring some of my clothes over and we'll organise the apartment so we find the best use of space.' She glanced at Pearl again. 'You do realise there'll be hardly any room.'

Pearl grinned. 'I don't care. Do you?'

Carrie returned her grin and laughed. 'No.'



Chapter 35

‘Why is this visit so important? Pearl asked Carrie. ‘Everyone seems to be on pins. I had a women in the shop this morning buying a new dress in case she sees him on his walk through Secunderabad which will take all of an hour. Barmy if you ask me.’

‘Who was it?’ Pearl looked up. ‘Who bought the dress?’

‘I think she’s the wife of one of Arnold’s friends. Brunette, quite pretty, but I thought she had a cruel look about her. She was quite rude to me.’

Carrie laughed to herself as she hung the new stock on hangers. ‘Yeah, I know who you mean. She was the one who was so hateful to me when I first boarded the ship over here. She was horrible, even made snarky remarks about John. Needless to say I stayed in the cabin for most of the voyage.’

‘If she comes in here again I’ll stick a pin in her.’

‘I’d love to be here when you do.’

‘Will you go?’

‘To the procession?’ Pearl nodded. ‘I thought I might take Gita. He’s a hero to her, like a saviour of sorts.’

‘Why?’

‘He doesn’t believe in segregation, and in South Africa where he used to live and work as a lawyer, he staged a non-violent protest about the tax levied on Indian immigrants. He was arrested and went to prison for it. But he ended the tax and since then he has become their hero. Now he lives in India in a spiritual monastery.’

‘How do you know all this stuff?’

‘David explained it to me when was organising the visit.’

‘He doesn’t wear very much, does he, Gandhi? I saw a photo of him in a newspaper.’

‘He’ll wear more than that on Friday. They call it a dhoti, like a big shawl wrapped all the way around him.’

‘That’s something I suppose. Do you think he’ll come in here?’

‘Into a dress shop.’ Carrie laughed. ‘I doubt it.’

‘Talking of dresses, when’s the day?’

Carrie took a deep breath. ‘Sunday. Arnold’s on duty. I’ll move out on Sunday.’

‘You haven’t changed your mind, have you?’

‘No. I’m looking forward to it, but I’ll be glad when it’s done.’

‘Will you leave a note?’

Carrie stopped what she was doing and looked at Pearl. ‘I hadn’t

thought. What would you do?’

‘Bearing in mind the way he’s treated you I would say no, but maybe something like, “I’m staying at the apartment for a while. I think it’s for the best.” What do you think? It’s short and sweet and he’ll get the message.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Yeah, something short. He won’t need an explanation. He’ll know why.’



ON THE MORNING OF THE procession Carrie drove to Gita’s house, and was heartened to see her sitting at a table with a cup of chai. She didn’t appear to have lost any more weight, and Carrie had taken some gulab jamun, an Indian confection made with milk, flour and cream, deep fried and soaked in rose-water syrup. She knew they were Gita’s favourite and she hoped they would encourage her to eat.

‘Gita,’ she cried as she went into the little house. ‘You’re looking better today.’

Gita smiled and held her hand up in welcome. ‘Carrie. It’s good to see you. I am feeling better today. I’m looking forward to the procession through James Street. What an honour it would be to see the Mahatma. It will be something I will always remember.’

‘We’ve got time for a cup of tea,’ said Carrie, ‘and some of these.’ She took the lid off the box and pushed them towards Gita, whose face lit up.

‘Oh, yes, I like them very much.’

‘I’ll make myself a cuppa. Do you want another?’ She pointed at Gita’s cup and Gita passed it to her.

‘Memsahib, I should be making refreshment for you in my house.’

‘How many cups of tea do you think you’ve made me this year, Gita?’

Gita laughed and waggled her hands in the air. ‘Many, many.’

‘So I can make one for you occasionally, can’t I? And we’ll eat those lovely sweets, yes?’

Gita nodded. ‘Yes, Carrie.’

When Carrie and Gita arrived at James Street it was busy to bursting point. Carrie had parked the Sprite some streets away, and she and Gita walked slowly towards the throng, Gita leaning on Carrie’s arm.

‘Are you going to be alright? Carrie asked her. ‘I’m worried all of this might be too much for you.’

‘I’m very good, Carrie. I’m so excited. To see the Mahatma is something I never expected in my lifetime.’

‘Well, I hope we can see him. There’s a big crowd.’

They continued towards James Street and met with a wall of people.

‘I’m not sure about this,’ said Carrie. ‘How on earth will we get to see him if we can’t see over people’s heads.’

‘He will know we’re here even if he can’t see us,’ answered Gita. ‘He is the Great Soul. He will know we are here.’

‘He doesn’t like us, does he? He thinks the British are trying to rule.’

Gita shrugged her sparrow-like shoulders. ‘He dismisses no one. He opens his arms to everyone, but there must be fairness and respect in all things. Yes, he wants us to be allowed to be as we are, to follow our own culture and traditions without criticism, and he wants to get his message of hope and peace to everyone without using violence.’

Carrie’s eyes widened. ‘You...know so much, Gita. You have studied him?’

‘I only know what I hear from the people who come through the village from the cities. There is much talk. They sit in the place where we gather and they talk, and the talk is of Gandhi. He makes us proud, proud to be who we are. And he is strong for us.’

Carrie nodded. Gita had surprised her with her passion, but then, she understood. When she discovered she was pregnant, a young girl without a husband and expecting a child, who knew she would lose her job and who thought her family would support her, her disappointment had crushed her. At that moment, when she was at her most vulnerable, she had wanted someone to take her hand and keep her safe and strong. But her vulnerability had allowed her to fall prey to people like Arnold Bateman who had poured scorn on her and her baby. Yes, she understood, so very well.

‘Carrie!’ A voice rang out that she recognised. It was David, standing by the podium, a lone soldier amongst the throng of Indian natives who jostled for the best positions.

‘David!’ She smiled and waved and he beckoned her forward. She shrugged and shook her head, holding her hands to her side as if to say, ‘How?’ He nodded and she watched in awe as he instructed the soldiers in his unit to carve a path through the crowd, standing firm to stop others getting though. He beckoned her and she walked Gita slowly forward towards the podium. ‘What a position. Gita you’ll be able to see everything.’ The look on Gita’s face was almost blissful, and she smiled widely, dipping her head to David to thank him. ‘Thank you so much, David,’ said Carrie. ‘This is the best thing we could have done for Gita. She needs this.’

‘I think many of our neighbours in Secunderabad need this visit. It will also show we are willing to work with everyone, that we’re all here together, and that we understand their need to uphold their

culture and traditions. I can honestly say I'm excited too. I've heard so much about the man.'

Suddenly there was a great shout from the opposite end of James Street. The crowd surged forward and Carrie and David stood firmly either side of Gita. Mahatma Gandhi walked slowly down the middle of the street. He was dressed in a pure white dhoti with simple leather sandals on his feet. He was a small man compared to those around him, yet had such charisma, such magnetism, that when he reached the middle of the crowd, silence fell. Many of those watching fell to their knees in worship. He placed his hand on the heads of many as he made his way to the podium.

'Will he speak? Gita asked.

David nodded. 'Yes, he will give a speech. He is a great orator I understand.'

Carrie watched in awe as Gandhi came towards them and finally stopped in front of them. Without warning, Gita stepped forward and knelt before him as tears rolled down Carrie's cheeks. She glanced at David. He too had tears in his eyes.

Gandhi placed his hands together as if in prayer, then leant and put a hand under her arm, raising her up.

'Do not kneel to me, sister. We stand together, side-by-side.'

Gita nodded and stepped back as Gandhi stepped up to the podium and began to speak. Gita's face shone with admiration and Carrie could barely take her eyes from her. As Gandhi continued speaking Gita seemed to grow in stature. He spoke of their need to stand together, and to work with other cultures and traditions while upholding their own. The people around Carrie nodded and cheered, and she knew she had witnessed something memorable and very special.

Later, when Carrie had returned Gita to her home, they sat outside in the shade, drinking small handleless cups of chai and finishing the sweets Carrie had brought with her.

'Well?' she asked Gita. 'What do you think of today?'

Gita smiled and half-closed her eyes, luxuriating in thoughts of the great man and how he singled her out. 'It was...the most wonderful day. I cannot wait to tell my husband and daughter and the rest of the village. He spoke to me, the Great Soul spoke to me. I will never forget it. Thank you, Carrie. Thank you for taking me. And please, thank Captain Lawrence again for me. I will remember it all my life.'



Chapter 36

Carrie placed the rest of John's things into a case and locked it. His toys had been taken in the Sprite the previous week, only his favourite felt rabbit remained, the one with which he could not sleep.

A small carpet bag held the remainder of Carrie's clothes. She put John in the cot with his rabbit and took the bags out to the car. She'd already written a short note to Arnold which she'd propped up against a jam-jar of wildflowers in the kitchen. She wondered at his reaction when he read it. If she knew Arnold at all, she knew he would quite likely explode with anger. There won't be any tears, she thought, no remorse or feelings of lost love. No, he'll think he's been done over, lost the game, not received value for money. It's too bad. I can't let what he thinks stop me from doing what I know is right for me and John.

She returned to the bungalow and lifted John from the cot, looking around the little bedroom she and John had occupied for nearly a year. There was sadness in her chest. This room where she and John had slept, the bungalow itself, had become their home, but it was never going to be forever. A forever home is the one you share with those you love. It couldn't be, could never be, because there was certainly no love between her and Arnold. What there was between them, a kind of simmering hatred, had poisoned the atmosphere, made her fearful and desperately unhappy and frightened for the future. He was her keeper, her jailer, and she his prisoner. A commodity, bought and paid for. It was a feeling that had shredded her confidence to tatters. Leaving Arnold, the bungalow and the mofussil was her escape. What shape her future would take once she had fled she didn't know, but she knew that every journey began with the first step, and leaving the Secunderabad mofussil was the first step.

As she was about to leave she heard a noise in the living room. She hurried out of the bedroom with John in her arms to find Arnold sitting in one of the chairs, a whisky by his side, and a lit cigarette between his fingers.

'Going out?' he said patronisingly. 'Why the cases?'

Carrie froze. 'I'm giving some things to Pearl. She doesn't have anything for the season.'

He nodded and swigged from his glass. 'Got a child has she? That was quick. Might be better for you...and him if you didn't lie to me.'

Carrie made for the door, but Arnold moved swiftly out of the

chair and blocked her path. 'Let me go, Arnold. Us living together. It's purgatory and you know it.'

'I paid for you.'

'So you keep saying, but it's wearing thin and I reckon you've had your money's worth.' He lifted his hand but she stood her ground. 'Yes, you can hit me. Go on, if it makes you feel better, but it won't change anything. You don't want me, not in any way, and I don't want you. I won't allow John to be raised in such an atmosphere. This is your house, you've always made it quite plain where my place is, and now I'm giving you the chance to live the life you want. I'll never say anything to anyone about your choices, but I'm a human being and I deserve to live the life I want, just like you.'

He lowered his hand, and to Carrie's surprise, slumped in the chair looking defeated. 'You'll go to him, I suppose.'

'I don't think that's likely, do you? He left yesterday to join a unit in France. Men are being killed, Arnold. You know that, you've been there. I can't think about what might happen. It's more than likely I'll never see him again, but whatever I do from now on, I do for John, and only John.'

He glanced up at her, his eyes red-rimmed, resignation etched across his features. 'You'd better go then. I hope you're not expecting me to pay for you and the brat. I've done enough of that over the last year. Once you go there's no turning back. Once gone, gone forever. Do you understand?'

She nodded her head once, then left without looking back. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest and she could hardly breathe. She knew she had made a tumultuous decision, one that went against what everyone else wanted, including her own mother, yet Carrie left with her head held high. There was nothing about the mofussil she would miss. She had made no friends there apart from Dorothy and David and they were gone. And now so was she. And she was glad of it.



Chapter 37

A calm settled over Carrie. If there was ever a moment when she felt she had grown up and become a fully-fledged adult, it was now. More importantly she was a mother, responsible for another human being apart from herself. It gave her a sense of place, a confidence in herself as a woman.

Having Pearl by her side had been the most fortunate stroke of luck, if it was luck that had brought them back together. Pearl was the person whom Carrie had cried over most often, the one she had desperately missed, the dear friend Carrie thought was lost to her for ever. They had shared a room at Nightingale Lane, a cold, unappealing attic with iron beds and sparse blankets that did little to keep them warm, where ice formed on the inside of the windows when it was winter, and where they'd shared their hopes and dreams in the middle of the night by candlelight, holding hands across the narrow space between their beds. Now they shared an apartment, compact, but one they had sweetened with colourful rugs, pretty tasselled cushions from the stores and street-side stalls on James Street, and vases of wild-flowers picked from the hedgerows on their walks with John. They lived side-by-side in quiet harmony, respect, and a deep sense that their lives would always be entwined.

In the evenings they would close the shop and wander up the back stairs to the apartment, tired but satisfied they had achieved something. Pearl had become an expert in women's fashion, a revelation to her, but one she was delighted with. They would talk about the people they'd left behind, like the Sterns, Mrs Coyle, the cook at Nightingale Lane, the tweeny who never said boo, and their families, and wondered if their lives had changed as much as their own. They decided it couldn't be possible, because their lives were changed beyond recognition, and they had altered irrevocably. Both had suffered, Pearl in the loss of her fiancé, and the illness she had endured because of it, and Carrie because she had given birth, and been 'sold' to a man who hated women and who had abused her, wrecking her self-confidence and any belief she had in herself. They would toast each other with chai at the end of the day, saying they had come through it all, and were stronger and more determined to have a happy future because of it.

She thought often of Dorothy, a young woman whose life could not be more different from Carrie's, yet they had become firm friends. Dorothy had told her that when she first met Carrie she had sensed

she was a kindred spirit with an unshakeable strength that she admired. That Carrie had started life in one of the poorest streets in London and earnt her living cleaning grates and serving people like Dorothy, seemed not to matter to her.

Gita had become a friend from the very beginning. Carrie had wondered if she had seen something in the slight Indian woman that reminded her of Florrie, but Gita was a quiet, nurturing, selfless person, a personal description that Carrie could in no way attribute to her mother. She also knew that Gita would never treat her daughter the way Florrie had treated her. Gita's family were beyond poor, but Gita, as unwell as she currently was, was the backbone of her family, respected, perhaps even adored, and Carrie could readily understand why. Gita had helped to save her, had bathed her wounds and provided friendship and support, something Carrie would never forget.

And then there was David, the love she had found by chance, but something told her it was meant to be. She had already realised that if she had not married Arnold and made a life in Secunderabad it was likely their paths would never have crossed. He had shown her kindness and gentleness, his eyes held her with such warmth and understanding a shiver would unravel down her spine when he appeared in her mind's eye. Johan had given her John, and she could only thank him for it. She didn't want to think of him in a bad way. The time they had spent together had been delightful for her, full of promise and expectation. That those promises and expectations had not been fulfilled had led her to David, and she couldn't deny that fate had had a hand in drawing her towards the man she hoped and prayed would be her future, because it was in God's hands should David survive, and luck of course. Luck always played its part. And if he got through? Then, and only then, could she think of them building a life together, with or without Arnold's permission and agreement of a divorce, something unheard of within the society in which they had been raised. Carrie shook her head. It seemed he would always have a hold over her, at least until she could make their separation legal, binding, and without question.



THE WEEKS FLEW BY, and suddenly Secunderabad was plunged into the cooler weather of spring. Carrie had learnt that it wasn't just the designers of London and Paris who dictated what people wore at any time, but also the seasons. They had just received the new stock for the cooler months, beautifully cut jackets and skirts, silk scarves, buttoned Mary-Jane shoes in darker colours with bags to match, and

Lyle cotton stockings in a multitude of colours.

‘Will you wear this look?’ Pearl asked Carrie. ‘It seems very proper.’

Carrie smiled. ‘It’s definitely that. I’m not sure it’s for me. Great for travelling though. I can imagine going back to London in an outfit like this. Can you picture their faces if you and I turned up, arm in arm, wearing one of these beautifully cut suits, a cartwheel hat with a feather, matching gloves and carrying one of those leather valises?’

‘Of course I wouldn’t return wearing anything less,’ laughed Pearl.

‘No of course not. Nor I.’

The girls laughed in unison, but both secretly wondered if they would ever return to the place they called home. Carrie was aware that David would probably never return to Secunderabad and she had wondered if it was time to say goodbye to the place she had fought so hard against and go back to London. If only I knew what was happening to him, she thought. If only I could see into the future I could make plans. And then there’s John.

She glanced at the little boy who had just celebrated his first birthday, sitting on a rug in the middle of the room. He was playing with wooden blocks, building them up into a line of three and knocking them down, which he thought was very funny. Carrie smiled and bit her lip. I’ll wait, she thought. We might hear something and then I can decide. She didn’t have long to wait. Within two months she had heard on the grapevine that David was missing in action, presumed dead.

‘Are you sure this is what you want, Carrie,’ asked Pearl, her eyebrows pulled together in a frown. ‘It’s a big decision to leave everything you’ve come to know. What about the shop?’

‘The shop has been a means to an end, Pearl, and I feel like I’ve come to the end of the road now that David’s gone.’

Pearl frowned and shook her head. ‘He might still be alive.’

Carrie lowered her gaze to her hands resting in her lap. ‘He might.’ She brushed a tear from her cheek. ‘And he might not. I can’t see how I’ll ever know, we know so little about each other. It didn’t seem necessary for me to know his address in London, and if he is ever found, surely that is where he’ll be sent.’ Her tears flowed thick and fast and she wiped them from her face with the heel of her hand.

Pearl was distraught. ‘Where will you go?’

‘Well, I can’t go home. Florrie, Elsie and the others have never returned my letters, not in all the time I’ve been here.’

Pearl’s mouth dropped open. ‘What nothing?’

‘No, not one letter.’

‘Why?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine, but it means they assumed they’d

never see me again, that I'd be in India with Arnold forever, or at least for so long we wouldn't really be family anymore. When Florrie got rid of me she assumed it would be for good.'

'Can you forgive her?'

Carrie shrugged. 'She's my mum, but in truth we were never that close. She always preferred Elsie to me, and I think Dad and I always got on better. I would have appreciated it if he'd stood up for me more, especially when I got pregnant, but he was never strong enough for her. She always got the last word, no matter what the subject was.'

'Will you want me to come with you?'

Carrie stared at her, wondering when this question would come. 'You must do what's right for you, Pearl. I wrote to Dorothy last month and told her of my thoughts and plans. She said she, for one, was very happy I was thinking of returning to London because she's missed our friendship. I think she's the only one in London who has. It really must be your decision.'

'Everyone I love is either here or in London. If you leave I'll have no one. I can't imagine that. Doesn't seem right.'

'What about Angus Fraser?'

'What about him?'

Carrie pursed her lips. She hadn't wanted to broach the question of Dr Fraser but she felt it was the right time. 'He delayed his return to Bombay. There's only one reason he would do that, Pearl, and that's because of you. I know you said there's nothing between you, but I'm not sure he sees it like that.'

'I do like him, Carrie. He's a lovely man and he's asked me to go to Bombay to meet his children a couple of times.'

'Do you want to go?'

Pearl looked thoughtful. 'I think it's too soon.' Carrie nodded. 'But maybe later, when we've all decided what we want, perhaps I could return, when the time is right.'

'So you'll come back with me?' Carrie's heart lifted and she breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn't bear to be parted from Pearl again.

'Yes, Carrie. I'll go back to London with you. You supported me when William died. Now it's my turn to support you.'



Chapter 38

The return voyage was as arduous as the one outgoing, except that Carrie and Pearl knew what to expect, and John was now fourteen months old and more robust.

‘I can hardly believe it was just over a year ago when we came here,’ Carrie said as they sat in the dusty carriage, watching the changing landscape as they got nearer to Bombay. ‘It’s gone so quickly. I began the journey as a newly married woman and childless, and look what’s happened to me.’

‘Did you tell Arnold we were going back to London?’ asked Pearl.

‘Yes. I felt I owed him that at least. He said it was the best news he’d had, because now he can lie about why we’re not living together. He’s going to tell everyone I have to go back because my mother’s ill. It suits him, and I don’t care what he says because there isn’t one single person at the mofussil whose opinion I value or who cared about us. I honestly don’t know what he’s worried about. They probably haven’t even noticed John and I aren’t there. They can think what they like about me. They always have and they always will.’

‘That was his fault. He could have made life much easier for you. It beggars belief why he didn’t.’

‘I never got to know him really, at least not the side of him that would have made me think it was acceptable to make a go of it. He never gave me a chance so...you’re right, it was his fault.’

‘And what about Gita? It must have been such a wrench to leave her.’

Carrie put her head down. ‘Yes, worse than leaving my own mother. But I’m going to write. And send money to help her.’ She glanced up at Pearl.

‘Really, Carrie? I’m so glad you will. She deserves it.’

‘Well, the shop is thriving, and now she’s back to her old self she’s determined to keep it going. I offered to close it down, Dorothy was willing, but Gita begged me to keep it open because she said it’s the place where she’s the happiest and it’s a link between us. I made her promise to take someone else on so she’s not entirely on her own and she can rest when she needs to, and she suggested asking her daughter to join her. It seems the hoped-for baby hasn’t arrived yet, not even a twinkle in her eye. She’s beautiful too, and will look very well in all the fashions every season. And they’ll both earn from the shop which will help them with better accommodation. I even suggested Gita could live above the shop in the apartment, but she said it might take

some time to convince her husband of it. Yes, things have actually turned out alright.'

'Apart from one thing.'

Carrie looked at her with sad eyes and brushed away a threatened tear. 'Don't Pearl.'

'Aren't you tempted to think that he might still be alive? He's missing, isn't he? He might be found.'

'Presumed dead, Pearl. And no one's heard from him. Dorothy said he'd been writing to her husband, Marcus, but there's been nothing for weeks.'

'Presumed by who? They might be wrong. He might be in a hospital somewhere.'

'I don't think I'll ever feel for anyone else what I felt for him. Even Johan didn't come close. I've realised it was infatuation. I was young and inexperienced and fell for the first one who showed any interest. What I felt for David was real love. There was respect and need...and passion. And we hadn't even...you know.'

Pearl laughed softly. 'I don't think you're meant to...you know. At least *we're* not. Heaven knows who everyone thinks blokes, "you know" with, if we're not meant to do it.'

'Did you and William? Before he went away.'

Pearl nodded. 'Yes, just the once. I didn't want to let him go, Carrie. If I could have sewn him into my arms and kept him there forever I would have. And now I wished I had. He'd be with me still.'

'But that wasn't William, was it, Pearl? He knew what he wanted to do and he did it.'

'Yeah, he did, bless him. And he might not have ever forgiven me if I'd begged him not to go.'

A silence fell between them while they studied their own thoughts.

'We're going to Bombay, Pearl,' said Carrie. Pearl nodded. 'And we'll have to stay for a day or so before we get on the boat home. I wrote to Basu at the Sundar Ghar Hotel. He's keeping a room for us.' Pearl nodded again. 'And it's where Dr Fraser lives. You'll have time to visit him.'

Pearl quickly glanced out of the window. 'Oh, I don't know about that.'

'I do. Of course you must visit him. He's asked you to, so it's not like your visit will be unwelcome, and what would he think if he knew you'd been in Bombay and you hadn't bothered?'

'I...I don't know.' Pearl looked flustered. 'I hadn't thought...'

'Well, think, now, and when we get to the hotel I'll ask Basu to send one his sons with a note from you, saying you're in Bombay for a day or so, and would he like you to visit. If he says no, then that's that.' Pearl looked sheepish. 'Why are you looking like that? You like

him don't you?" Pearl nodded. "There you go then. One thing I've learnt this year is that if you want something you must try until you get it. And, Pearl, don't say it's too soon after William. Of course you'll never forget him, sweetheart, you loved him with all your heart. But...look what happened to him. He was so young, hadn't really lived his life, and it was taken away from him. Life's too short for regrets. There's no point in living your life by other people's rules. If you like Angus, even if it's only in friendship, why shouldn't you be friends?"

Pearl settled back against the banquette seat and pulled John onto her lap. She cuddled him to her, loving the warmth of his chubby body and the fresh clean smell on his skin. She rubbed her cheek across his soft curls as she realised Carrie had said everything that had gone through her mind since she realised that Angus Fraser might have a place in her life. Pearl had argued with herself, thinking that her attraction to Angus's kindness and gentleness meant that she was betraying William's memory, but she understood now that William had taught her how to love, without condition and with a full heart. She smiled to herself at the thought of seeing the ebullient, gentle giant who was Angus, whose stature and cheerful manner belied his tenderness and calm nature. Carrie's right, she thought. We're only friends, and if it were to lead to something more I can decide whether it's right for me. If it's not there's no harm done, but I'll have made a wonderful caring friend, and that can't be wrong.



BOMBAY WAS HOW CARRIE remembered it, dusty and bustling, and full of noise. The women in their bright saris flocked together in groups in the main street, gossiping and giggling, and Carrie wondered what it was that made them so happy. The stalls selling everything but the kitchen sink were still there, and the air was filled with the calls of the vendors and the aroma of spices and flowers.

'I love it here,' said Pearl. 'I loved being in the shop in Secunderabad, but nothing beats the busyness of a marketplace. It's what I missed about London. I think it must be in our blood.'

'I agree. There's something very exciting here. It's probably as you say, the marketplace, the people, the feeling there's always something new about to happen. All we need now is a brazier and someone selling roasted chestnuts and it would feel even more like home.'

'And the people are so friendly. I stayed in a tiny hotel with just a couple of rooms, like a bed and breakfast I suppose, and the owner made me feel so welcome. She couldn't do enough for me.'

'We could learn something from it, too. I think it's why Gita, and you, were so popular in the shop. You know about customer service

and how important it is. The customers came to love Gita and I have no qualms about leaving her in charge of the shop. She is a businesswoman in the making and I've no doubt she'll do well.'

'What will you do when you return to London, Carrie? I'll have to find work, I need to earn my living. I'll probably have to go back into service. What about you?'

Carrie nodded. 'Yeah, I'll have to find something. We'll see. I'll need to work, just like you?'

'Service?'

'Maybe.'

Basu was as good as his word and had a room waiting for them. It wasn't the same room she shared with Arnold; Basu seemed to sense it would make Carrie uncomfortable after her previous stay, and instead found them a beautiful suite with a tiny nursery alcove leading from the main bedroom. The twin-beds had elegant muslin canopies and pale lilac linens.

'Isn't he nice?' said Pearl. 'And this is beautiful. Funny isn't it, the hotel looks a bit shabby from the outside. You'd never think it was like this in here.'

'I think it's the dust,' answered Carrie. 'It gets everywhere, and I mean everywhere. In some ways it's worse here than in Secunderabad. It seems to batter the outside of the buildings with the constant toing and froing outside. It comes towards the buildings like a wave. It could definitely do with a lick of paint, but it's sort of charming, don't you think?'

'S'pose it is. I'm comparing it to 99 Nightingale Lane, where everything had to be pristine.'

'Mm, and uncomfortable and not very homely. I can't wait to see how they've fared since the war took hold. You know the government are bringing in conscription because of the heavy losses.'

'Johan?'

Carrie nodded. 'I expect so. Why not? He's of the right age. It will wipe that self-satisfied look off their faces, that's for sure. Mrs Stern will have an attack of the vapours when she discovers her beloved only son is being sent to war.'

'Is that revenge, Carrie?' asked Pearl, smiling.

'No, but when it comes down to it, war is a leveller. It doesn't matter what class we're in or where other people think we belong, or how much money you have, or where you live, whether in Nightingale Lane or in Whitechapel, we're all made of flesh and blood, and we can all be killed. The same weapon will kill anyone it hits, it doesn't pick and choose, or leave someone standing just because they think they're better than someone else. William died for what he believed in, a young lad from the East End. David is missing and very

likely dead, an officer, someone who definitely was not from my class who was raised in the salons of Hampshire, although it didn't bother him. Johan will discover that the status he thinks he has in society will not protect him. That much he will learn if nothing else, and it's a very difficult lesson.

Pearl's note to Angus was swiftly answered with an entreaty for her to visit as soon as she could. As she made ready for the visit that afternoon, Carrie noticed her hands were shaking as she tried to button her shoes. Carrie knelt in front of her and pushed her hands away, laughing.

'Here, let me do it. You're a bundle of nerves, girl.'

'I know, isn't it silly? I am nervous, Carrie. What if the children hate me?'

Carrie sat up and frowned. 'Why would they hate you? No one could hate you.'

'Yeah, but they lost their mum didn't they?'

'And you're a friend, just visiting to give your condolences. That's all.' She pulled a funny face and they both laughed.

'Am I?'

Carrie got up from the floor and sat on the bed next to Pearl. 'I think that's up to you, love. Only you can decide.'

'What if he wants more?'

'Do you think he will?'

'It sort of felt like that, y'know, when we were in Secunderabad. Over Christmas. He didn't need to stay, but he did.'

'Well, there you are then. He likes you and you like him. You'll know when you see him. I'm a firm believer in gut-instinct. If your tummy does that rolling thing, I reckon..., I reckon you like him more than you want to admit.'



'WELL?' ASKED CARRIE when Pearl returned from her visit with Angus Fraser. She carefully removed the pin from her hat and laid the beautiful straw carefully on the bed. She was quiet, thoughtful, seemingly contented.

'They're angels, his children. They liked my hat. I'm not sure they'd seen one like it before.' Carrie smiled and raised her eyebrows. 'And did Angus like your hat?'

Pearl nodded. 'He did.'

'And you? What did you make of it all? What was the house like? And his mother-in-law? Did you meet her? Pearl nodded and Carrie's eyebrows knotted as she waved a hand at her friend. 'Well, what happened? Come on, Pearl. I thought you'd be full of it and wouldn't be able to wait to tell me all about it.'

‘They’re very nice, all of them, although I think his mother-in-law was a little suspicious, you know, watchful. I could feel her eyes on me all the time, like she wondered why I was there, but she wasn’t unpleasant. Angus was attentive. We had tea, chai, with little Indian sweets covered in syrup, very sweet, and Earl Grey. I didn’t like it. Too scented. I think I prefer the sludge at the bottom of me mum’s teapot.’

Carrie giggled as she sat on the bed, pulling her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. ‘And then what happened?’ she asked, still laughing.

‘The children climbed onto my lap. They are so sweet, like little dolls. The boy wore a funny little suit in bright colours with a stand-up collar and shiny trousers, and the little girl, the most beautiful dress in a bright pink taffeta with flowers embroidered around the hem. Underneath she wore tight taffeta under-things in a matching colour. Oh, and their hair, so dark and shiny, and their eyes so large and brown and full of excitement. Such sweet kids.’

Carrie inhaled comically. ‘That’s the children taken care of...oh, and the mother-in-law, but you haven’t mentioned Angus. How was he?’

‘Welcoming, of course. He asked me to visit, didn’t he?’

Carrie leant her head to one side. ‘I can feel a “but” in the air.’

Pearl sat on the bed and played absent-mindedly with her hat. ‘I’m glad I went. I had to know, didn’t I, whether thinking of changing my life was right for me. It was obvious he wanted me to consider becoming part of their lives, but it wasn’t in the way we thought.’

Carrie frowned and put a hand on her friend’s arm. She sensed disappointment in Pearl. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘He wants a nanny for the children, so his mother-in-law can take care of her parents.’ Carrie’s eyes widened in dismay. ‘And I didn’t feel... There wasn’t that connection there, Carrie, between us, I mean. Don’t get me wrong, he was as kind as ever, attentive, very...pleasant, but I didn’t want to stay there. The house is still his wife’s house, if you know what I mean. There are pictures of her everywhere, a huge portrait on the wall. She was beautiful, so beautiful, and I noticed his mother-in-law kept looking at it. She also said it was very fashionable in Indian high-society to have a British nanny.’ Carrie’s hands flew to her mouth. ‘And I said I wasn’t aware of that. She asked me what my plans were and I said I had a passage booked to England and I would be leaving tomorrow, to which she looked relieved.’

‘And Angus?’

‘His smile didn’t falter. I think he might have been a little disappointed. We’ve all read stories about the widower falling for the nanny, but in truth I don’t love him. I didn’t get any of those feelings

when I saw him again.' She looked up at Carrie and her eyes filled with tears. 'All I could think about was William, wishing he was here, that it was him I was talking to, sharing the time with. I wanted to tell him about my adventure of coming to India, of how I worked in the shop and sold clothes and met Gita and David. I wanted to tell him all those things, and I kept thinking, when I get back to London I can tell William, I can tell William, but I can't tell him, can I?'

Carrie wrapped her arms around Pearl's shoulders as tears ran down her cheeks.

'You and me,' she said. 'You and me are the same. We know what love is and we know what loss is. Dearest Pearl, I'm so, so sorry, sweetheart. I wish I could change things for you, more than anything, even more than I wish I could change things for myself. At least you know. You know you're not ready to find someone else yet. Maybe you never will be, and maybe I never will be, but if that's how it's meant to be, then it's how it's meant to be.' She turned Pearl to face her, rubbing the tears from her friend's cheeks. 'But we have each other, and we always will. You and me, we're a team. We'll take care of one another, and when John's grown up, he'll take care of us both.'



Chapter 39

Carrie and Pearl watched out of the porthole as the ship pulled into the docks at Southampton. The City of London had been their home for four weeks as they'd sailed from Bombay to England, and they'd anticipated this day like children waiting for Christmas.

'Oh, look,' said Pearl. 'It feels so strange, like I've been away for ten years instead of less than one. Do you think we'll settle alright after everything we've been through? I wrote to Mum to let her know I was coming home, but if I got a reply it's in Secunderabad waiting for me. Don't s'pose I'll ever get to read it.'

'I wrote to my lot too, but I shouldn't think it made a tuppence of difference. They won't be rolling out the red carpet for me, that's for sure.'

'They'll be pleased to see you though, won't they? Glad you're alright and you got home safely?'

'I shouldn't think Florrie could care less, and if she's thinking about anything it'll be whether Arnold will want a rebate on the money he gave her because I've come home. She'll be wondering why though, I've no doubt, and blaming me I expect.'

'And Arthur?'

'Dad'll be pleased, but he'll have to hide it. And Elsie will have a face on her like a bulldog, looking me up and down. And d'you know what, she will look me up and down. D'you know why?'

Pearl shook her head and they both turned away from the window. Carrie went to her trunk and pulled out two jackets, one in deep blue the other in forest green, with skirts to match. Two pairs of Mary-Jane shoes followed, with stockings in a paler version of the suits, and two little hats. Two leather valises followed.

Pearl's mouth dropped open. 'Carrie, oh, my goodness. You said when you returned home you wanted to wear one of those suits,' she cried.

Carrie laughed. 'Yeah, well now we can both wear one. Lovely aren't they?'

Pearl nodded, still stunned. 'Which one's mine?'

Carrie shrugged. 'You choose. They're the same size so I'm easy.'

'Can I have the blue one?' Carrie pushed the blue jacket and skirt across the bed, then the shoes, hat and stockings, and Pearl held them up in front of her. 'I can't wait to wear them.' She held the jacket against her, her eyes sparkling. 'Shall we get changed now?'

'Yeah, let's show the people of Whitechapel what they've been

missing.'

They dressed quickly, both parading around in their brand-new suits and ending up in fits of giggles. Pearl put on a posh voice and began to walk around the cabin swinging her valise. 'I might go and visit the Sterns,' she said. 'Say I'm new in town and would they mind introducing me to society.' She stuck her nose in the air and walked towards Carrie stopping in front of her. 'Oh, 'ello,' she said in a plummy voice. 'Me name is Pearl Watson, and I've just come up from 'ampshire, don't yer know. I wondered if you wouldn't mind pointing me in the right direction for slumming it with the toffee-nosed nobs what live in this street.'

Carrie collapsed onto the bed in fits of laughter, then got up quickly for fear of creasing her skirt. 'Oh, Pearl, I dare you. Do you think they'd recognise us?'

Pearl put her hand on her hip. 'Why the 'ell would they recognise us? They never even looked at us. Me own Mum won't recognise me in this get-up.'

Carrie pulled a face. 'And mine definitely won't.'



THEY GOT THE TRAIN from Southampton and arrived at Waterloo Station three hours later. John slept most of the way which Carrie was grateful for. He hadn't settled on the ship, had often been sick because of the ship's motion, and she was glad to get him onto dry land.

'I've arranged for our trunks to be sent on, Pearl, to your mum's house. I hope it's alright?'

'Yeah, course it is. Mum'll love it. She'll think herself very cosmopolitan because she's received trunks from India. No worries there.'

Carrie glanced at John and closed her eyes. She knew she should have been able to send them to her own house, but she was quite sure it would have gone down like a ton of bricks. She wondered how they would treat John, knowing one of Florrie's bugbears apart from everything else was the fact that he was Johan Stern's son.

'I'm dreading going home, Pearl, she said. 'Will you come with me? We can go to your mum's first if you like, but honestly, I don't want to turn up there on me own.'

Pearl glanced at Carrie with affection in her eyes. 'Course, Carrie. I get it, I really do. I always liked Florrie, but she's got a right reputation for being as 'ard as nails. We always used to say you lot in the family was always getting in the neck for something or other.'

They stood on the pavement. It was getting dark, and Carrie wondered what would happen when they saw her. Her stomach rolled

with nerves and she glanced at Pearl and rolled her eyes.

‘What if they didn’t receive my letter?’

Pearl shrugged. ‘By the sounds of it, it wouldn’t make that much difference. Anyway, whatever happens, you’ll stay at mine. Mum was over the moon to see us, wasn’t she?’

Carrie nodded. ‘Yeah, she was.’ She looked down at herself in her forest green suit and Mary-Jane shoes, almost wishing she’d worn something more in-keeping with her surroundings. ‘I just hope they don’t think we’re rubbing their noses in it, y’know, dressed like this.’

‘Stop worrying, Carrie. Knock the bloody door, for cryin’ out loud.’

Carrie raised her hand to knock. ‘Here goes nothing.’ She rapped on the door and waited. After a few seconds she heard a curtain being pulled away from the door. It was opened a few inches and Florrie’s face peaked out.

‘Oh. It’s you.’

‘Hello, Mum. How are you?’

‘I’m alright.’

Carrie glanced at Pearl who managed a little smile. ‘Can we come in?’

‘Well, I don’t know. The babe’s just got off and we’re making to get ready for bed.’

Pearl pushed the door open. ‘For Chris’ sakes, Florrie, let us in. Get that kettle on and let’s have a cup of tea.’ She stepped over the threshold pulling Carrie with her. ‘Why the hell wouldn’t you want us here? I don’t get it.’

They went into the living room and Carrie gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. On the sofa lay Tom, his head and hands bandaged, and what she could see of his face was bright red with sores.

‘Tom,’ Carrie cried. ‘What happened?’ She turned to look at Florrie. ‘What’s happened to him?’

The curtain to the scullery was pulled back and Arthur appeared, wiping his hands on a tea-towel. ‘Got burnt in an explosion at the tanning factory. The whole bloody place went up. He was lucky to get out, even with the injuries he’s got. Some of ‘em weren’t so lucky.’

‘Alfie?’ Carrie said, fearful her younger brother had been one of them.

‘Wasn’t on shift, thank God.’

Carrie went across to the sofa and sank down next to it, her beautiful suit forgotten, her valise flung on the floor. ‘Tom?’ she said gently. ‘Tom, can you hear me?’

‘He hasn’t spoken since it happened,’ said Florrie. Carrie glanced at her. This wasn’t the Florrie who had sent her away to India with a man she didn’t know. She seemed diminished somehow, a pale version of the person she was.

‘And when was that?’

‘Six weeks ago.’

‘And you didn’t think to let me know? He’s my brother after all, an’ I still care about him.’

‘What could you have done, being all the way over there? I didn’t want to worry you, and at the time I didn’t know you were coming home, did I?’

Carrie stood and faced her mother. ‘So you didn’t get any of the letters I sent?’

Florrie flushed. ‘There’s been a lot going on, our Carrie, more than you could know.’

Carrie put her hand on her hip and jutted her chin out. ‘Like what? What was so pressing you didn’t have time to write to your daughter, or was it because you thought you’d seen the back of me and that you’d never see me again?’

‘It wasn’t that.’

‘It was exactly that,’ Arthur said, speaking up at last. ‘We weren’t allowed to mention you, Carrie, and I know the reason why.’

Florrie stared at him. ‘And why’s that Arthur Dobbs?’

‘Don’t you Arthur Dobbs me, Florrie. It was guilt, guilt because she more or less sold you to some ‘orrible bloke she didn’t even know,’ he said, looking at Carrie now. ‘I never wanted it, Carrie, and I’m sorry I didn’t speak up earlier. I let you down, girl, and I’m very sorry for not having the guts to go against her like I should have.’

‘Where’s Elsie?’

‘Off with her new man.’

‘Her new man? What happened to Len?’

‘Got banged up, didn’t he?’ said Arthur. ‘Took on one job too many and got done for it. You know what Elsie’s like, wasn’t prepared to wait. Anyway, I knew he wasn’t any good, always knew it, told her I did, but she didn’t listen. Too much like yer mother.’ He glanced across to Florrie who put her head down.

‘She wasn’t sold off, then? What was it, couldn’t you find anyone to take her? Carrie shook her head. ‘Well, I’m here now, and we’ve got more important things to think about. Has Tom had a doctor? Shouldn’t he be in the hospital?’

‘He’s been in hospital,’ said Florrie, sulkily. ‘They sent him ‘ome yesterday for us to look after.’

‘What about a nurse? He needs medical care.’

‘They cost money.’

‘Yeah, they do, which you have. The money from Arnold Bateman. You can use that.’

‘All gone.’

‘Gone? On what?’

‘Living,’ said Arthur. ‘Now the war’s taken hold the dock-masters are only hanging onto a handful of men. I got laid off. I know it was wrong to take money from Bateman, Carrie, but it’s kept us afloat until now. If I’d known what would happen to our Tom...’

‘We should go, Carrie,’ said Pearl. ‘It’s getting late and mum likes to lock up before ten.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Alright.’ She glanced at Tom, her heart breaking at the sight of him. ‘I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon,’ she said. ‘I’ve got something to do in the morning, I’ll organise a nurse to come and see Tom and change his bandages. He needs proper medical care and those bandages need changing every day.’

Florrie stared at her with a hard look. ‘And how will you afford that, lady?’

Carrie went up to her and put her face close to hers and Florrie stepped back, sensing this was a different Carrie to the one she’d sent away. ‘None of your business, and if you’d had the decency to answer my letters and shown some interest, maybe you’d have found out.’

The following morning, Carrie left Pearl’s and got the tram to Covent Garden. She wore an understated dress and coat, not wanting to stand out. It was clear the mood of the country was sombre. The streets were grey and the faces of the inhabitants were greyer. She was on a mission and the less attention she got, the better.

She wandered the streets, looking in the shop windows, passing the flower stalls that were almost empty, wondering how much further the country could sink before it landed on its knees. She sighed with sadness. Already conscription had made its mark. The younger men had been sent to fight and the streets seemed almost empty of them. The only people she saw were women with children and older people who walked aimlessly, as if they had no reason to be out, but needed to feel they weren’t the only people left in the world. The poverty she had seen before she left London was nothing compared to what she witnessed now, and she realised that she had come back at just the right time, particularly where Tom was concerned.

When she thought of him lying there, looking as though he’d been to war himself, she realised his injuries were so great he would probably never be sent to the front to fight. She wondered whether he thought it was a blessing or a curse, then decided he was probably in so much pain even thinking would be too much for him. She’d hoped the war would be over before conscription began, but began it had, on the 2nd of March that year, and if the war continued for much longer, young Alfie would be sent, of that there was no doubt.

Pearl’s mother, Doris had put Carrie in contact with a local nurse who had promised to visit Tom every day and change his bandages. She was a young woman with a family and had been overjoyed when

Carrie had offered her the job of nursing Tom, because it meant she had a regular wage coming in. Her husband had been sent to fight and she had endured the struggles of those with nothing but each other. Not that there was much to buy. Carrie's heart had sunk when she'd seen the almost empty shop windows and the shopkeepers looking forlorn. The war had changed everything and she wondered where it would end.



HER THOUGHTS ACCOMPANIED her to Nightingale Lane, number ninety-nine, the house she'd come to see. She stood on the pavement in front of its greying facade and stared up at the windows, no longer sparkling with Christmas decorations, but dark and empty, like a body without a soul whose eyes were etched with sadness. The plush velvet curtains had disappeared, and the glass that she once polished until it shone like crystal was dusty and smeared with grime from the street.

The steps leading up to the front door had not been swept for months. A For Sale sign had been attached to the wrought iron railings with dirty string that trailed across the pavement. Carrie bent down and picked it up, laying it across the railings. The once pristine and palatial 99 Nightingale Lane was now empty. The rooms no longer resounded with laughter from the Sterns' daughters, maids were not running up and down the backstairs tying their aprons on as they arrived late for their shift. Mr and Mrs Stern were not in their drawing room, sipping tea from pretty china teacups and hosting dinner parties for the great and good, and Mrs Coyle no longer held court in the kitchen, bellowing at the tweeny to wash the pots so she could use them again, or fussing over intricate confections for the dining table. They were all gone, every single one of them. The life the house had seen was over, and as yet no one had taken up the baton to fill the house with the sounds of the living. The house looked abandoned and ghostly, and as tears welled in Carrie's eyes she wondered what could have gone so badly wrong for the Sterns that they should have lost their home.

She stepped toward the For Sale sign and took note of the agent's name, Cripps and Prime, whose offices were in Covent Garden. She took a breath and raised her face to the second and third floors, then the attics at the top of the house where she and Pearl had become friends. The paintwork around the attic windows had begun to flake and a pang of regret went through her.

She had known happiness in this house. She had found her best friend, and thought she had found love with Johan Stern. It was here she had conceived her son, late one night when Johan's parents had

gone to the theatre with his sisters and they knew they were alone. He had pulled her into the drawing room and laid her down on the chaise longue and told her he loved her and he would do everything in his power to make sure they could stay together. He had convinced her his parents would accept her into the family, if she would only show him how she felt about him by allowing him to make love to her, and she had given herself to him willingly because she was sure she was in love with Johan Stern and that he was in love with her. If felt as though it happened decades before instead of just two years, and although she had been disappointed and deeply hurt when Johan had married, she couldn't deny that her feelings for him before then had brought her great happiness, even though his for her had been false.

She turned away from the house and retraced her steps down Nightingale Lane. Joe, the roasted chestnut man was no longer on the corner, stoking his brazier and filling it with plump chestnuts. He had gone to war before Christmas 1914, and she wondered if he had survived, if his wife and children had ever seen him again.

As she continued down the street, she pictured the children who were always to be seen, running in gangs, feral, out of control, having fun and shrieking with laughter, usually pushing a baby in a pram whose face was grimy and running with snot. What I'd give to have those days back again, she thought, a world with no war, young men walking the streets and not having to leave their loved ones. Poverty was one thing. War was quite another.



SHE REACHED THE OFFICES of Cripps and Prime and looked in through the window. A young studious-looking woman and an elderly gentleman with whiskers the colour of snow and a large reddish nose that gave away his love of whisky and cigars were sitting at two desks, their heads bent; their concentration fixed on the papers in front of them. Carrie wondered how much business they were doing in a time of war. Everything was in short supply, including money to buy property and she hoped fervently it would work in her favour.

They both looked up as the bell rang when she pushed open the door. She paused in the frame then shut the door behind her.

‘Mr Cripps or Mr Prime?’ she asked the gentleman.

He rose from his chair and made a slight bow towards her. ‘Julius Prime, Ma’am. Mr Cripps is no longer with us I’m afraid. This,’ he indicated the young woman sitting at the other desk, ‘is his daughter, Matilda Cripps.’

Carrie nodded at them both in turn, then sat without being asked in the seat opposite Julius Prime’s desk.

‘99 Nightingale Lane.’ She said. ‘I understand it’s for sale.’

‘Indeed it is, Miss...’

‘Mrs...Bateman.’

‘Indeed it is, Mrs Bateman. Been on our books for about six months.’

‘I understood a...a family lived there previously.’

‘Yes, so they did, but the war, you know. It has cut many of us down, and not just those in the field of battle. Those in the financial world have suffered terribly. No investment you see, and no government contracts. Everything is going into the war effort.’

‘And this is what happened to Mr and Mrs St..., I mean, those who lived there previously?’

‘Exactly, Mrs Bateman. Are you interested in the property?’

‘Well, there is a lot to consider, as you’ve said. We are in the middle of a conflict are we not?’ Mr Prime nodded. ‘So clearly the price would have to be...er, comparable to any property that has been left to decline because of the conflict.’

‘Are you considering making it your home, Mrs Bateman?’

‘I’m not sure, Mr Prime. That we shall have to see. I have business interests elsewhere in the world, and I certainly need a base to work from. I can only assume that because it has been standing empty for some while the property requires some refurbishment. I’m correct in assuming this...I would imagine.’ She turned her gaze onto Matilda Cripps, who stared at her through thick-lensed glasses without acknowledging her statement, then looked back at Julius Prime.

‘It certainly needs a woman’s touch, Mrs Bateman, that is true,’ he answered. ‘Perhaps you would like to visit the property. We have the keys. I can meet you there this afternoon at two of the clock if it would suit you.’

Carrie nodded. ‘It would suit me perfectly, Mr Prime. I will meet you there at two o’clock this afternoon.’

Carrie shut the door behind her, the bell tinkling in her wake. She strolled down the High Street towards the tram stop, a surge of happiness flooding through her, and a satisfied smile playing on her lips.



Chapter 40

‘It’s a bit empty in ‘ere,’ said Pearl, as she dragged a side-table into the drawing room. And what about curtains? We can’t not have curtains.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Carrie as she dusted the skirting boards and the frames around the doors. Everything’s being delivered this afternoon. It’s going to take an age to get all the curtains up, but as you say, we can’t not have curtains.’

‘And will the boarding rooms be done first? What about beds?’

‘The boarding rooms will be finished by tomorrow night. I’ve got Mrs Coyle and her daughter working up there now. They’re making a grand job of the rooms, everything’s in fine shape, it was just dirty.’

‘Fancy you asking Mrs Coyle to work for you.’

‘Why wouldn’t I? She needed a job. She’d been out of work since the Sterns left and because of the war no one’s been hiring. Her daughter was in the same position. She’s got five kids to feed and she’d been laid off from the tanning factory because of the explosion.’

‘All’s well that ends well,’ said Pearl, cheerfully.

Carrie straightened up and stretched her back. ‘Do you really mean that? Really?’

‘Yeah, I s’pose I do. The most wonderful thing would be if William walked through that door, but, I know he’s not going to and I’ve accepted it.’ She nodded, agreeing with herself. ‘It’s time to move on, and working with you has made me happier than I thought I would ever be again.’

‘We’ll be alright, won’t we?’ said Carrie, smiling at Pearl with affection.

‘Yeah, we’ll be alright.’

There was a rap on the door and Dorothy appeared in the black and white tiled hall, her arms full of flowers and with two little girls holding onto her skirts.

‘Hello,’ she cried. ‘Anyone home?’

‘Dorothy,’ Carrie cried. ‘It’s lovely to see you. Come in, yes, come in and see our handiwork.’

Dorothy swept into the drawing room and turned around as she surveyed the room. ‘This is a lovely room,’ she said. ‘I’ve brought you some flowers. Thought they’d make it more like home for you.’

‘Thank you so much,’ said Carrie, relieving Dorothy of the huge bunch of flowers. ‘By the way, this is Pearl, my best friend in all the world.’

Dorothy smiled and hugged Pearl, kissing her on both cheeks. 'At last we meet. I've heard so much about you.'

'And I, you,' said Pearl shyly, smiling at the elegant woman. She beckoned to Carrie. 'Give me those flowers, Carrie. I'll put them in some vases and put them in the reception rooms. They're so beautiful and they smell lovely.'

Carrie watched Pearl go then turned to Dorothy, her eyebrows raised. 'And who are these beautiful girls?'

Dorothy clutched the hands of both girls and pushed them forward. 'This is Seraphina. She's six, and Dottie, who's four.'

Carrie leant forward. 'Hello,' she said smiling. 'Thank you for coming to see me. Perhaps Aunt Dorothy will bring you back when we're all settled. Would you like to come for tea? We'll have some lovely cake and tiny sandwiches, just perfect for little hands. And my son, John would love to meet you.' The girls glanced up at Dorothy and she nodded.

'Yes, please,' said Seraphina. 'Dottie and I would like that very much.'

The girls ran off to sit on the window seat and Carrie's eyes followed them.

'Bless them,' she said quietly, then lifted her eyes to Dorothy's. 'How are you?' she asked her. 'Are you managing alright? It must be such a change in your life, Dorothy, almost a ready-made family.'

Dorothy nodded and swallowed hard. 'Yes, a bit of a shock to the system, but they're such little dears. I couldn't let anyone else take care of them, and Marcus adores them.'

'Are they living with you?'

'Some of the time, but when they want to go home to their father, they go. They choose what they want to do. They have a tutor whom they see every day for a few hours apart from Saturday and Sunday, so they have routine in their lives. I do think it's so important.'

'And what about you, Dorothy? You look a little tired.'

'Yes, morning sickness does that to you.'

Carrie's face broke into a smile. 'Dorothy,' she cried, hugging her. 'You're expecting.' Dorothy nodded. 'When? When are we going to have a new little arrival?'

Dorothy waved her hand at her, laughing. 'Oh not for ages yet. It's early days, but we're over the moon. And it'll be lovely for the girls to have a new cousin.'

'And a new friend for John.'

'Absolutely. Of course, it's a boy, so they can do boy things.'

Carrie threw her head back and laughed. 'How do you know that? Y'know, it might be a girl, Dorothy. There's always that chance.'

Dorothy nodded. 'I know, but we need more boys, don't we? I have

a feeling this little one is a boy, and he'll be like my lovely Marcus. We need more men like him, especially now. We've lost so many of our young men.'

Carrie bent her head and Dorothy clutched her hands. 'Are you alright, my darling? The news about David was awful. I'm so sorry. You and he barely got started.'

'No, and if he hadn't been sent to France I'd probably still be in Secunderabad. Fate can be so cruel sometimes. We'd only just found each other, and I was devastated when I found out what had happened, but I have John and I had to grit my teeth and get on with it. I've found a strength I didn't even know I had. Losing David right at the moment when we'd promised to wait for each other was very painful. Why do all the good ones go, Dorothy?'

Dorothy shook her head. 'I don't know, darling. This war, it has ruined so many lives, and I've no doubt not just in this country. Families are being torn apart. There has to be a better way of settling differences without killing each other. Men, you see. They think war is the answer.'

'Are you still with the suffragettes?'

'Yes, but Marcus has begged me to concentrate on the girls and the new baby for now. He knows how passionate I get about things. I've agreed of course, but when things have moved on I'll be doubling my efforts to get our voices heard. I hope you'll join me, and Pearl. We all need to have our say.'

'Yes, Dorothy. I'd like to be involved. Of course I'll help.'

Dorothy sighed. 'I should be getting along. The girls' tutor is due in an hour.' She hugged Carrie to her. 'If you need anything, let me know, won't you, Carrie. I think what you're doing here is marvellous. Do you have any boarders yet?'

'Yes, my brother, Tom. He was injured in the explosion at the tanning factory. I have a nurse, a cook, and there's Pearl and me. We're as much as we need for now. When some of the young men are sent home with injuries we'll take them in and we'll nurse them and feed them up until they're back on their feet. The war office have agreed to send them our way. I wanted to do something to help. I saved everything I earnt from the shop and it was how I was able to buy this place which I got for a song. They wanted to get rid of it and I came along at just the right moment.'

'And with Gita running the shop in Secunderabad, it will help you keep it afloat.'

'Yes, and we can make sure your income continues, especially now there's a baby on the way, and Gita is so pleased she will be able to continue working there. She loves it and I have every faith in her that she'll run it at least as well as I did.'

Dorothy nodded. 'Wonderful. You've done a grand job.'



99 NIGHTINGALE LANE was lived in again, albeit in a very different way. Gradually, over the weeks and months the rooms were occupied by young men who had been wounded, whose injuries weren't profound enough to be sent to the over-subscribed hospitals, but who needed care and attention that couldn't be given at home, which Carrie and her team provided.

The house was never still. There was always someone new coming in to be looked after and once again 99 Nightingale Lane buzzed with activity. They all said Mrs Coyle's cooking was the best they'd ever tasted, and good food along with expert nursing and the right care and attention healed many of the young men enough to be sent home, at least for a while. Some of the men were sent straight back to the trenches to begin the fight again, but some were so badly injured they could not return.

Tom made excellent progress under Carrie's eye. His burns were attended to daily by the nurse and to Carrie's relief he began to speak again.

'I want to stay here, Carrie,' he said. 'I want to do my bit. I know I'll not be sent to the front, my hands have had it, but I can help here, can't I?'

She sat on the side of his bed and pushed his hair from his eyes. 'I'd hoped you'd say that. We need you here, and it'll be wonderful for the men coming here to have someone to talk to who has experienced injury and who has been nursed back to good health.'

'I'm sorry, Carrie.'

'What do you mean? What have you got to be sorry for?'

'I let you down. Well, we all did. I should have spoken up. Dad cried every night you know, after you left.'

Carrie closed her eyes, determined not to cry. 'Don't Tommy.'

'I can't imagine how hurt you were after what mum did.'

Carrie inhaled and smiled. 'Y'know, Tom, I learnt a lot while I was away. She might have done me a favour. Alright, I didn't think so at the time, but if I hadn't been sent to India I wouldn't have this place. I worked my socks off when I was in Secunderabad, built up custom, made sure people got good service. Let's face it, I know about service. And I saved everything I earned. I couldn't have done that here. Look what happened to the Sterns.'

'What happened to them?'

'They lost everything. All their money. No one invested, no one saved. In less than two years all the money he had made over a

lifetime had gone. We don't know about these things, do we? I don't know about markets and things like that, but the Sterns were in the wrong business, and they were arrogant. They thought nothing could touch them. They were very wrong about that. Julius Prime told me what happened.'

'What about Johan?'

'What about him?'

'Do you know what happened to him?'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, and I don't want to know. Me and John don't need him. We didn't need him then and we don't need him now.'

'Do you still love him?'

'No, Tom, I don't love him, and d'you know what, I don't think I ever did.'



Chapter 41

Carrie was woken by someone banging loudly on the front door. She got out of bed and dragged on her dressing gown and slipped her feet into her shoes, still half asleep. She opened her door to find Pearl on the landing.

‘What the ‘ells going on?’ said Pearl. ‘I don’t like the sound of it.’

‘No, neither do I. Will you come down with me?’

Pearl nodded. ‘Yeah, come one, we’d better find out who thinks it’s alright to wake God fearing people at this hour.’

They ran down the curved stairway into the hall. Carrie unlocked the door with Pearl peering over her shoulder. On the step stood two soldiers, both with a hand under the arms of a soldier they were supporting.

‘Sorry, miss, to wake you at this hour, but this bloke needs some attention. We were given your address.’

Carrie nodded, fully awake now. ‘Oh, right, yes, of course. Bring him in. What happened?’

‘He was found wandering the streets. He’d been sent back from the front, been in one of the military hospitals but no one knew who he was.’

She opened the door wider and the soldiers brought the man in. He was filthy, and his face and hands were covered in dried blood. As they laid him on one of the sofas, Mrs Coyle came down the stairs, her robe tied tightly round her ample middle and her hair in curlers. Carrie looked up and beckoned to her.

‘Mrs Coyle, can you make sure these soldiers get something to eat and a cup of tea.’

She nodded, asking no questions. ‘Follow me,’ she said to the soldiers. ‘I’ve got some nice ham in the pantry and some bread I made this afternoon. You two look like you could do with something inside you.’ The men obediently followed her into the kitchen and Carrie turned her attentions to the soldier they had brought in.

‘Shall I get some soap and water?’ asked Pearl. ‘He needs cleaning up. Those wounds will never heal with all that filth on him.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Yes, and some of that ointment from the nurses room.’ She took the soldiers cap from his head. Pearl brought in a tin bowl and a soft cloth and Carrie began to clean the man’s face. She wiped the cloth gently across his forehead, removing the blood that had flowed from a head wound, then after rinsing it out in the bowl, wiped his cheeks. She frowned then gasped. ‘Pearl. Pearl,’ she cried.

She stood abruptly, her hands covering her mouth.

Pearl ran into the room holding a bottle of ointment. 'What's up, Carrie? What is it?'

'It's David. I think it's David.'

Pearl knelt down by the sofa and peered into the soldier's face. She turned to Carrie and put an arm around her shoulders, nodding. 'Yes, it's him. Oh, Carrie. He's alive.'

Gradually, they helped him shrug out of his great-coat, and removed his blood-soaked jacket. He was utterly exhausted, barely having the strength to breathe as they worked to clean his bruised and bloodied body and bandage his wounds, but when Carrie held a cup of warm milk to his lips he opened his eyes and stared at her, tears streaming down his cheeks. His gaze was unswerving; he looked deep into her eyes and she smiled gently at him.

'Am I dreaming?' he whispered. 'Have I died and gone to heaven.'

She stroked his cheek. 'No, David, you're still with us. We're going to look after you.' She took his hand and put it to her lips. 'You're going to be alright, my love.'

He exhaled and relaxed his aching body against the sofa, a ghost of the man he once was, his cheeks hollowed out by lack of food, dark circles shadowing sunken eyes that had seen too much pain and anguish. 'I prayed for this when I was in the trenches. I prayed so hard, to see you again, to be with you, the only woman I have ever loved. An angel has answered my prayers.'

She put a soft finger against his lips. 'And we're together again. We're all together again. And we always will be. Nothing can part us now.'



99 Nightingale Lane

Part 4



Chapter 42

Carrie opened her eyes, rolled onto her side, and stared at the wall. She could hear Pearl and Mrs. Coyle downstairs, preparing breakfast for the ten men who were currently being cared for at 99 Nightingale Lane. The nurse was due in an hour to check or change dressings and administer advice, and she knew she should get out of bed and greet her, even though it was her day off.

She sighed and thought about David, a sick feeling churning in the pit of her stomach. The previous day had been a bad one; he had slept fitfully the night before, his sleep interrupted by nightmares, crying out, and many, many tears. Her eyes brimmed when she thought of him, the once confident, attractive man now buckled in grief, a shadow of who he once was. Carrie had thought her heart would break, because no matter how much she tried to reassure him, to pull him out of the horror of the trenches at the front, nothing seemed to touch him. She knew his mind was damaged. Every night she prayed that over time he would regain a semblance of the man he once was, that he would hold a conversation with her like he used to; she spoke to the nurse every day about his lack of progress but she would simply shake her head and tell Carrie that time was a healer. Carrie sighed again and slid her legs out from under the covers wondering what the day had in store.

After washing and dressing she stood by the bedroom window, looking out onto Nightingale Lane. 1917 had just dawned, the New Year had come and gone without celebration; the country still enveloped in the sadness the continuing war had brought with it, like a dense black cloud that had arrived in 1914 and had yet to lift. The cloud had followed her relentlessly since David's arrival, when he had been rescued by two soldiers as he wandered through London's streets on the darkest of nights with no idea of who he was or where he should go. They had brought him to Carrie's hospital, a place of respite set up for men who had been released from military hospitals but had no home to return to, or whose injuries required palliative care. David was neither, his injury could not be seen, but the soldiers had heard such good things about Carrie and her ladies that when they had found David Lawrence roaming the streets it was the first place they had thought of. When Carrie realised who David was the relief that flooded through her was enough to almost melt her, but little did she know that what had happened to David in the intervening months, from when he had left her in Secunderabad and

been posted to France, had changed the man she loved. She still loved him of course, with all her heart, but it was with a heavier more knowing heart that she attended him each day, because she knew that without a miracle, he would never be the same again.



DOWNSTAIRS, PEARL GREETED Carrie with a smile and Mrs Coyle put a hand on Carrie's shoulder.

'Now, come on, Carrie. Get that down yer,' she said, placing a dish of steaming porridge and a mug of tea on the table in front of her. 'We've a couple of new intakes coming in today, not that you need to worry. Make sure you take the day off like you're meant to. Go for a walk. Nowhere is very pretty right now, but you need to get some fresh air, my girl.'

'What about David? He'll wonder where I've gone. He'll think I've deserted him.'

Pearl glanced at Mrs. Coyle and sat at the table next to Carrie, taking one of her hands in her own.

'Carrie, you do so much for him. You're forgetting you have needs too. You're so pale, sweetheart.' She brushed a stray lock of hair away from Carrie's face. 'I remember a time when I was grieving. You wanted me to take care of myself, to find some normality in my life after William had been killed.' She smiled affectionately at her friend. 'Now I'm saying the same to you. You've done everything you can for David. Given up hours and hours of time for his care, and to no avail. You're exhausting yourself. Do you not think it's time for him to go to a specialist hospital, somewhere where they will give him the treatment he needs?'

Carrie's eyes widened. 'Send him away, you mean?'

Pearl shook her head. 'Not send him away, Carrie. Not like that. He needs the kind of treatment we can't give him here. The nurse said...'

'The nurse? She said David would make progress but it would take time.'

Pearl sighed. 'I think...I think you're hearing what you want to hear. She said, if he gets the correct treatment he would have a better chance of a recovery, but it would take time.'

Carrie closed her eyes and lowered her chin to her chest. She knew Pearl was right but she hardly dare admit it to herself. David had been at Nightingale Lane for six months and was as deeply affected by all that he had experienced as he had when he first arrived. In truth he had made no progress at all and she was at her wits end wondering what to do next for him. They had helped so many young men who had returned to their homeland and needed convalescence, but it

seemed they couldn't mend David.

She nodded as her face crumpled, and the long held-back tears rolled down her cheeks as she sobbed into Pearl's shoulder. Mrs Coyle pulled a handkerchief from the front pocket of her apron and blew her nose, then wiped away the tears that had gathered under her eyelids, misting her vision. She put a large, capable hand on Carrie's arm and squeezed it affectionately.

'It's for the best, darlin',' she said. 'You don't think so now, but in the long run, you'll see. You mark my words, they'll know how to help him, Carrie. And you'll have him back again, more like he used to be. You'll see.'

'He'll never forgive me,' Carrie sobbed. 'He made me promise not to send him away.'

Pearl looked into Carrie's eyes. 'Do you think he'll remember what you've said, Carrie? Do you think he'll remember any of it? His memory has been affected, apart from his time in France which it seems is all he remembers. Let them help him, Carrie. It'll be worth it in the long run. He'll see you only meant the best for him.'

Carrie blew her nose and nodded. 'I know you're right. I'll speak to the nurse when she gets here. She probably knows what to do and the best places for him.'

Pearl nodded and inhaled a deep breath of relief as she glanced at Mrs Coyle. 'It'll be alright, Carrie, you'll see.'



CARRIE AND DAVID SAT in the gardens of Alexandria House Hospital, a hospital in name, but unlike any hospital Carrie had ever seen. She realised it was a nursing home and she wasn't sure whether this made David's stay better or worse. She glanced at him and reached for his hand.

'It's so lovely here, isn't it?' David didn't offer a reply. Instead, he inhaled and looked across the vast lawn towards a copse of trees at the other end. 'You'll be alright here, won't you, at least for the time being?'

'Will I?'

Carrie's heart sank. He wasn't going to make it easy for her and she knew whatever she said would not placate him. 'It's just until you feel better, David, until you feel more like yourself again. The doctors have said it could take a little while but they're very hopeful.'

He turned and looked at her, his eyes like flint. She winced at the sight of his grey skin, the hollow cheeks, and the dark smudges beneath his eyes. 'Oh? When did they say that? They haven't spoken to me? Why am I being treated like a child, to be pushed and pulled

and to stay where I'm put? I'm a man, a soldier. I don't need to be told what to do.'

Carrie closed her eyes in frustration. This was a theme that David returned to again and again, that he was a soldier, a man with two arms and two legs, and just because he'd been to war didn't mean he wasn't still a man. 'I'm sure no one thinks that,' she whispered. 'And I know you're a man, a strong man, but sometimes we need a little help, and this is one of those times. You'll be back at Nightingale Lane in no time, you'll see.'

He turned his head away from her, as though talking to the trees. 'To do what, Carrie? Follow you around like a lapdog, carry the bags of the other broken men who come to you? Is that what my future holds?'

She sighed and leant her head back to stop the threatening tears running down her cheeks. 'Your future will be whatever you want it to be, David. Whatever you decide it to be. It's in your hands.'

He turned quickly and stared at her as though seeing her for the first time, as if she were a stranger. His eyes were bright, too bright, the flinty look gone, and replaced with the sharpness of glass. 'Will it?' 'Of course.'

'I want to be Captain David Lawrence. It's who I am. It's only you and these damned doctors who say I'm not.'

And there it was, the blame, the accusation it was her fault, the focus on being stopped from doing the one thing he had been trained to be; a soldier, a man of strategy, one other men looked up to. That David felt demeaned by his illness was plain to see. He wasn't used to control being taken from his hands and Carrie understood. What she had struggled to understand was why he blamed her when she had been hundreds of miles away from the fighting and had strived to help him since his return.

'Because you are the nearest person to him,' his doctor had explained. 'His ego has been crushed, he wants to be the one to look after you, not the other way round. Even your trying to help can wound him. Try not to take it personally, Mrs Bateman. You are clearly important to him, you have provided a safe haven for him when he needed it, but even though he knows you've done everything you can it's quite likely he resents you for it. Bringing him here was the best thing you could have done. Hopefully, when he settles he will see it more clearly and your friendship will return to the one it was.'

Carrie knew the doctor was being polite. Their 'friendship' was far more than just a friendship after all, and she was perfectly aware the doctor knew it. She loved David, loved him more than she had ever loved anyone in her life, had grieved for him when she thought he was dead, would have waited for him for the rest of her life if

necessary. That he had returned to her when everything had pointed to them never seeing each other again had convinced Carrie they were meant to be together, but she had also had to acknowledge their life together would be entirely different from how she had imagined it would be, that it was possible that at the end of his treatment he may be a very man different from the one she had fallen in love with.



Chapter 43

‘How did it go?’

Pearl put the kettle on the range, lit the flame, then sat at the large, scrubbed pine kitchen table in the vast kitchen at 99 Nightingale Lane.

Carrie shook her head, her face expressing a look which was the epitome of sadness. ‘I don’t think he’s David anymore, Pearl. Not the David I knew. His body, his physical look is almost the same, his skin greyer, his exhaustion is evident, and he’s thinner definitely, and the healed wounds are there for all to see, but his mind...his mind is,’ she shook her head again, ‘...not the same.’

‘What did the doctors say?’

‘That there were no guarantees. That they would use every treatment they could to release him from his current state, but his experiences could likely have changed him completely...and forever. They made no promises.’

Pearl wanted to say something, to ask Carrie something so profound that she knew it could hurt both of them. The last thing she wanted was to hurt her friend more than she was already. She was Carrie’s best friend. Surely, if anyone could ask her, she could.

‘What will you do, Carrie? What will you do if he doesn’t...y’know, come back to you, as he was?’

Carrie covered her face with her hands, and when she placed them back in her lap her cheeks glistened with tears. ‘There’s no love in his looks, Pearl. He used to look at me with such joy, such love, such affection, we were so close, so wonderfully close, but it’s all gone. He almost blames me for what happened to him. He knows he’s not the same, no one needs to tell him that, he’s sadly aware that he feels different, but if there’s no one to blame then I can only suppose he’s wondering what it was all for, the fighting, the fear, the terrible loss of life. I think he saw some dreadful things, things that no human should ever witness. The doctors said he could also be wracked with guilt because so many of his men lost their lives and he survived.’

Pearl left the table and filled the teapot with boiling water, taking it to the table along with two cups and saucers decorated with bright pink flowers and gilded handles, incongruous within the solemnity of their conversation. She stirred the pot then left it to infuse for a few moments.

‘Has he talked about it, you know, what happened?’

‘No.’ Carrie shook her head and swallowed. ‘I tried to bring it into

our conversations which were stilted at best, but he would turn away from me and raise his hand as though to wave it away, and I knew better than to push. I suppose it must have hurt him too much to talk about it, but I felt quite sure that if he could have just shared it with me it might have made him feel better, not completely, but perhaps the first step. He wasn't prepared to take it.'

Pearl pushed a cup of tea across the table towards Carrie. 'You know I love you, don't you, we all do.' Carrie nodded. 'And you know I especially just want the best for you and I would never want to hurt you or make you feel bad.' Carrie took a sip of tea and nodded again, her face downcast. 'You deserve to have a good life, Carrie, a happy life with love and joy. You know that too?'

Carrie put her cup onto the saucer which made a noise like a little chink. 'You mean without David, don't you?'

'I suppose I do. If he doesn't return from the treatment the man he was, or at least not as the man who made you so wonderfully happy you might have to consider that it wasn't meant to be. I've heard so many stories like this, of wives waiting for their husbands to come home on leave, or to be released from hospital, only to be confronted with a person they didn't know anymore. Stella Lewis who owned the little hairdressers in Bucks Row? Her husband, Danny came home on leave and didn't speak to her once until he went to the pub one night and got blind drunk, then hit her and accused her of seeing other men, which she wasn't, before laying on his bed and not getting up until he was due back at the front. She told me he had never laid a finger on her before he left for war, was the mildest, friendliest young man you could ever wish to meet. Now, she says she barely knows him, and doesn't want him to go back to her on his next leave, that's if he makes it through. She just can't face his anger again, and she's frightened for their little boy.'

Carrie sighed 'Not just us then.'

Pearl reached across the table and put a hand over one of Carrie's. 'No, sweetheart, not just us, but Mrs Coyle and me, we'll support you and help you whatever you decide to do. I hope you know that.'

'Course I do, Pearl. You and Mrs Coyle, and John, you're my family, more than my family back home. Florrie's already told me to "get rid" as she so pleasantly puts it, mainly because she thinks David's income will be affected because he's unwell. Money. It's all she thinks about.'

'Yeah, and look where that got her?'

'I know.'

'When's John coming home?'

'Tomorrow afternoon. I'm so glad Dorothy offered to have him to stay for a few days while I sorted all this out. He loves spending time

with the girls, and is as excited as they are about the new baby.'

'I wonder what it will be?'

'Dorothy's convinced it's a boy. It would be lovely for John too, if it were. Even things out a bit.'

'And only two years between them. They could end up being great friends. She must be about due.'

'Yeah, but lucky her, she has loads of help. The girls have a tutor and a nanny, and no doubt the baby will have the same.'

'She's been amazing with those little girls. It must have been so hard to take them on when her sister died.'

'Dorothy is a strong woman, Pearl. She's been raised to have everything she ever wanted given to her, her life is gilded in a way ours never was, yet she still fights for things that she feels are important. She's not selfish or self-centred or thinks she deserves something just because of her station in life. She's determined to continue with suffrage when the war is over. She says women are doing all the jobs blokes used to do before the war. Why shouldn't they be considered equal to the men who used to do them and get the same pay?'

'Well, she's right, isn't she?'

'Yeah, she is. And some of our men won't return, or even if they do...'

'They might not be the same.'

'No. They'll need us then, maybe want us to continue doing what we've been doing, and if anyone is the perfect person to further the cause, it's Dorothy.'



'HOW WAS HE? I HOPE he didn't give you any trouble.' Dorothy came into the impressive hallway of number ninety-nine, huge with her pregnancy, but no less elegant.

'Darling, he's a joy, as you well know. Placid, willing to play, the girls love him as do I. I barely knew he was there. And actually, Carrie, he sat with the girls during their lessons. I know he's hardly two but he's a clever little chap, was really taken with Mrs Bancroft who said he should be started as soon as maybe. If you'd like him to share her with Seraphina and Dotty I would be very happy.'

Carrie's eyes widened. 'Already. I hadn't thought... In my world schooling is such a privilege, Dorothy. Not everyone goes to school, particularly at the moment. Tutors and governesses are unheard of. They're for the rich, not for the working classes.'

'I think you're underestimating yourself, Carrie. You're a businesswoman, aren't you? You run this amazing place, more like a

hotel than a nursing or convalescence home. Your little son deserves the best. Mrs. Bancroft is wonderful, an older woman, motherly yet firm. He'll learn spellings and sums, and even French and Latin later on. Go on. Do it for John. I think it would be marvellous.'

Carrie smiled and reached out for Dorothy's hands. 'Thank you, Dorothy. It sounds wonderful. Yes. Yes, why not. We're never too young to learn.' She widened her eyes at Dorothy. 'And shouldn't you be taking it easy being so close to your time. Come on, lady, sit down and we'll have some tea.'

The settled themselves in the front sitting room. The children ran in and out, playing hide and seek and Catch-Me-if-You-Can until their mothers quietened them, and they chose a book from the bookcase and sat quietly on the rug in the centre of the room. John copied the girls, picking out a rag book from his toybox and pretending to read each page which made them all laugh.

'He's so sweet,' Dorothy said, sipping her tea, then choosing a cream slice from the cake stand. 'Ooh, these are so good. I'm going to have to be strict with myself after I've had the baby. I can't stop eating, but these are too lovely to resist.'

'Mrs Coyle's a gem, but not friendly to the waistline if you know what I mean. I have to watch it too. Since I've had John it's too easy to get rounder and I'm not ready for that yet.'

'Nor me, but everything's so tempting. Marcus thinks it's hilarious.' Carrie smiled and looked away. 'Sorry, Carrie. I wasn't thinking.'

'Sorry? Why?' Dorothy closed her eyes momentarily, a sad expression crossing her face. 'Oh. You've heard.'

'There's not much Marcus doesn't hear about his colleagues. You did the right thing, darling, but it must have been incredibly hard.'

'He hates me.'

Dorothy left the huge chair in the bay and squeezed in next to Carrie on the sofa, awkwardly putting her arm around Carrie's shoulders. 'No...no, he doesn't, darling. How could he? He needs it, Carrie, he just doesn't realise it. Marcus and I are fully behind your decision. A few months, hopefully that is all it will take, just a few months, and then you'll have him back again.'

'Or not.'

Dorothy inhaled deeply and looked into Carrie's eyes. 'Well, it's possible, but we must be positive. I think perhaps you could cross that bridge when you come to it. Let's hope the treatment works, but remember, Carrie, you're not alone. You have everyone here, and me and Marcus. Don't cope with everything alone. Please. We don't want you going down the same route.'

Carrie rested her head against Dorothy's shoulder. 'What would I do without you and Pearl. Thank you, Dorothy.'

‘No thanks required.’



Chapter 44

‘They want men and women to work in the munitions factory in Silver Town. Tommy could apply if he wanted to as well. I’m thinking of going, Carrie. What do you think?’

Carrie looked up from folding bandages and tidying the medicine cabinet, surprised. ‘Oh. You want to leave?’

Pearl laughed. ‘No, daffy. Just part time. We do a brilliant job here, Carrie, but I’d like to get involved with the other end...helping our lads out before they get here if needs be. I think they’ll offer any hours, so I could help out here in the mornings and go to Silver Town in the afternoon. What do you think? And your Tommy seems so much better now after the fire at the tanning factory. I know he feels bad because he thinks he’s not helping the war effort. It might help him get some self-esteem back if he’s doing something positive.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Yeah, I like the sound of that. What a good idea. Even if he started part time with you it’ll make him feel included. But aren’t you a bit scared of handling all that stuff. You know there have been explosions up north, people have been killed. Doesn’t it put you off?’

Carrie shrugged. ‘Our boys can’t pick and choose can they? They don’t get a say in it and without them fighting for us we’re sunk. The need for munitions has got bigger and bigger and they’re not protected without them. Look what happened to my William. Wrong place, wrong time, and inexperienced in the ways of war. Hopefully, our boys have got a better chance now, and we need to make sure they have everything they need.’

‘Yes, yes, you’re right. The mornings are always the busiest here. The men who have been sent to us rest in the afternoons and it’s the best time for you and Tommy to go. Me and Mrs Coyle and Francis can definitely cope in the afternoons. Francis has been a godsend, and I know how grateful she and Mrs Coyle are that she found a job here.’

‘Yeah, well she needed it with five kids to feed. The explosion at the tanning factory put so many workers out of a job, and look what happened to your poor Tommy.’ Carrie turned her head away with a knowing smile on her face and continued to rearrange the bottles on the shelves even though she’d arranged them already. ‘And what’s that look for Mrs. Bateman?’

Carrie’s mouth dropped open in mock annoyance. ‘Please don’t call me that.’

‘It’s your name.’

‘Mm, at the moment.’ She glanced back at Pearl. ‘It’s just that I thought you and Tommy seemed to be getting close. He likes you y’know, Pearl.’

Pearl shrugged and grinned, her face colouring. ‘Well, I like him. He’s very...nice.’

‘Just nice?’

‘He’s younger than me, Carrie. Quite a bit, but he’s kind and polite and very considerate. You don’t come across that very often.’

‘Does the age thing bother you? And are you ready to move on?’

‘We’re in a war, Carrie. There was a time when we were in Secunderabad where I thought I could never love again, not like I loved William. He was my everything, but time is a healer, it’s true. And you should remember that too. And at the end, when it’s all over, how many of our young men will never return? I think if I’m to move forward and make something of my life I need to accept that.’

‘And his scars? The left side of his face will never be what it was. It looks much better, That red, angry wound has almost disappeared, but it can never be hidden completely.’

‘He’s still a handsome boy, Carrie, even with the scars. God knows how Florrie and Arthur did it, but they produced four very good-looking children.’

Carrie threw her head back and laughed out loud. ‘I’ll tell Florrie you said so. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled.’

It was Pearl’s turn to laugh. ‘Thrilled? Florrie? She’s such an old sour old puss, I can’t imagine she’s ever been thrilled about anything.’



THE LIVING ROOM AT Hanbury Street looked exactly the same as when Carrie left it two years before. The kettle still hung by a hook in the fireplace. The rugs were still faded and threadbare. And the atmosphere...it was the same, the ever-present feeling that something was about to go wrong and she, Carrie would get the blame. She wondered why she expected there to be changes in her parents’ home, why anything would be different, Florrie wasn’t one for concerning herself with how their home looked as long as they had plenty to eat and Arthur was in work and bringing in a wage at the end of the week. It was basic, as basic as life could be, and Carrie understood it. They had had a hard life, a hand to mouth life where there was never a spare penny and luxury was a word that had never been used because it wasn’t part of their vocabulary. The war had made it worse for them, much worse, because it was always the poorer members of society who suffered first – they had nothing to begin with – and the lack of work and the growing shortages increased the poverty for

those who lived in places like Whitechapel.

Carrie knew she wasn't a welcome visitor at Hanbury Street, not unless she brought something from Mrs Coyle's kitchen which today she did, had planned to, because she knew it would make her arrival in her old home easier for Florrie to bear. There was only one reason for Florrie to welcome her and it was if she had brought something with her, some homemade bread, a ham hock, or a pat of butter. Otherwise her mother could not see a reason for her to interrupt her daily routine.

'I'd have thought you would have had too much to do at that house of yours to come here,' she said, her voice low and dour. 'Was there something you wanted?'

'I've come to see Tommy, and Mrs Coyle sent this,' she answered, placing a muslin wrapped half used hock of ham on the kitchen dresser. 'You could maybe make some soup with it, some brawn, or a pie.'

'I think I know what to do with a ham hock, Carrie Bateman. That is still your name I take it, or have you got a new one since?'

'You know the answer to that.'

'And you know he'll be round here looking for his money if he's ever posted back to London. Why you couldn't stay there I don't know. It's all wrong, you living with that soldier without being married. It goes against the grain, our Carrie.'

'You don't want to know why I couldn't stay there, and I'm not living with him.'

Florrie looked at her frowning. 'What d'you mean, you're not living with him?'

'He's in hospital.' Carrie wasn't about to discuss David with her mother so she kept it brief.

Florrie nodded. 'About time. Gone off his rocker, ain't he? That's what I 'eard.'

Carrie returned her look with one of thunder, almost ashamed that she'd never felt so much like striking someone, and disappointed it was her own mother who had made her feel this way. 'Why do you have to be so nasty? He was fighting for his country, for you and me, yet you talk about him like he's nothing at all. Have some respect.'

Florrie returned her look, grabbed a cloth off the sideboard and began vigorously polishing the living room table. 'When you have some respect for yourself, my girl, I might begin to feel differently. First you get knocked up by Johan Stern, then you leave your husband, someone who took you on when the chips were down, then you set up house with a ragtag bunch of people and a man you're not married to. How am I supposed to feel?'

'This might come as a shock to you, Mum, but I don't much care

how you feel. You didn't care how I felt when you married me off to a horrible man for money when I needed you and dad the most, and you forgot to mention all the young men we nurse back to health in that house I've set up, but then, if you remembered it you'd have to say something good about me wouldn't you, and that would never do, would it?' She stared hard at Florrie, daring her to reply. 'Where's Tommy?'

'Upstairs,' Florrie answered sulkily.

Carrie turned on her heel, her blood running hot through her veins. She realised that Florrie had never asked her about John, his health, welfare or whether he was happy. She had never brought John on any of her rare visits to Hanbury Street because she was convinced Florrie didn't deserve to have a relationship with a grandchild she didn't give a fig about. That Arthur, her father, didn't see John was a regret to Carrie, but she had also reconciled it with herself that if Arthur was desperate to see his only grandson he could have visited him at Nightingale Lane, although she assumed that Florrie had put a stop to that idea before he could have even suggested it.

At the top of the stairs she knocked on her old bedroom door.

'Come in, Carrie.'

'You knew it was me then?'

He laughed. 'Well, *you* certainly told her that's for sure. I'm glad. Someone needed to.'

'She makes my blood boil she's so holier than thou. She makes it sound like I'm running a bordello instead of a convalescence home.'

'Don't be too hard on her. Different generation.'

Carrie raised her eyebrows. 'She doesn't see any good in anyone, Tommy, that's the problem. All she sees is the bad side of people. No one is all bad.'

Tommy grinned. 'Not even the Bosch?'

She grinned back. 'Well, maybe them.'

He patted the bed for her to sit down. 'You don't come here very often, not that I blame you, so I'm reckoning something's brought you here, a reason why you want to see me.'

'Why did you come back to Hanbury Street? You could have stayed at Nightingale Lane.'

He put his head down and began picking absent-mindedly at the eiderdown on the bed. 'I...didn't want to take up a bed that another man needed, Carrie. You do such a great job there, all the men who come to you say how wonderful you and Pearl, Francis and Mrs Coyle are, and how hard you work. I didn't want to be a burden.'

Carrie frowned and put a hand on his arm, no longer the skinny arm of the boy she left when she went to India, but the arm of a man who knew what it was to know fear and experience great pain. 'But

you were such a help to us, and honestly, surely it would be better for you at mine rather than come back here and listen to her moaning all the time. Doesn't it get on your nerves?'

He nodded. 'Yeah, it does.' He paused and swallowed. 'It's not the only reason I came back.' Carrie shrugged and looked at him askance. 'I got this.' Tommy reached under his pillow and pulled out a book, opened it to the middle and pulled out a white feather. Carrie's hands went to her mouth and her skin turned pale. 'Who gave you that?'

'A woman in the street. I don't know who she was, I don't think it matters. I'd just left Nightingale Lane to go for a walk on my day off and she ran up to me and called me cowardly scum, then handed me the feather. She said I should be ashamed for not supporting my brothers at the front.'

Hot tears ran down Carrie's cheeks. 'Oh, Tommy. I'm so sorry.'

He glanced up at her, his face red with embarrassment. 'Why should you be sorry. It's me who should be sorry. Look at me, covered in scars, my foot so mangled by the explosion I can hardly walk some days. I'm bloody useless. Neither use nor ornament as Florrie would say.'

Carrie got to her feet ready to run down the stairs and have it out with Florrie, but Tom put a hand on her arm. 'She didn't say it to me. I haven't told her about the woman and what happened, and she doesn't know about the white feather.'

Carrie sat back on the bed, her hands tightly wound in her lap. 'I should keep it like that if I were you or you'll never hear the last of it. You know what she's like about her so-called reputation in the community. If she thought you'd let her down you'll never be forgiven. I have to face it every time I come to Hanbury Street which is one of the reasons I don't come.'

'What are the other reasons?'

'John and David. Johan. Arnold Bateman. She says he didn't get his monies-worth and thinks he'll come knocking for a rebate if he ever comes back to London.'

'What do you think?'

'I think he was glad to see the back of me as long as his precious secret didn't come out. Florrie doesn't know about that. I would love to tell her just to see the look on her face.'

'And will you?'

Carrie smiled. 'Maybe. One day. If she pushes me too far.'

'And John?'

'He doesn't exist in her eyes. Her own grandson. She has never asked me about him. He's such a little boy. It's not his fault. It makes me very sad that his own grandparents don't want anything to do with him.'

‘What about his other grandparents, the Sterns?’

Carrie pulled a face. ‘No idea. I don’t want to involve them and they wouldn’t believe he was their grandson anyway. Have you ever heard anything about them?’

Tom shook his head. ‘Not recently. I heard the Sterns’ business had gone belly-up and they had to leave. Don’t know where they went though.’ He looked thoughtful, then his face brightened as though he remembered something. ‘Anyway, why are you here?’

‘Something that might make you feel better about that.’ She indicated the white feather on the bed then proceeded to tell him about the positions at the munition factory. ‘Pearl’s going to work there in the afternoons after she’s helped me out in the mornings. She wondered if it was something that would interest you. The money’s not brilliant but it’ll supplement your wages from me when you come back.’

He grinned at her. ‘Come back?’

‘We need you, Tommy. You could do the same as Pearl, work at Nightingale Lane in the mornings, then go across to Silver Town with Pearl in the afternoons.’ She smiled at her brother, her face etched with love for him. ‘Please, Tommy Dobbs. You’re very much missed there. The boys have been asking after you, said you’re a right laugh.’

‘Really? They missed me?’

She nodded. ‘And I don’t think they’re the only ones. Mrs Coyle’s been pining after you, and, well, there’s Pearl of course.’

‘Pearl? You think she’s missing me?’

She nudged him. ‘You like her don’t you?’

His cheeks went bright red and she laughed. ‘I knew it. You could do an awful lot worse. She’s a lovely girl is Pearl.’

‘Florrie hates her. Says she comes from scum.’

‘Florrie hates everyone. Pearl’s family are the salt of the earth, would give you their last ha’penny if you needed it. Don’t listen to her, Tommy. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.’ She waited then nudged him again. ‘What do you say, will you come back? Will you go for a job at the munitions factory? It would be your contribution to the war effort and that white feather can be forgotten forever.’

Tommy nodded and Carrie flung her arms around his neck. ‘When should I come,’ he said, his voice muffled by Carrie’s shawl.

She let him loose, still smiling. ‘There’s no time like the present. Your room’s still there, we’ve never used it. It’s your room, Tommy and it always will be, as long as you need it.’

Florrie was waiting at the bottom of the stairs as Tommy followed Carrie down to the scullery.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked Tommy, looking around Carrie,

two frown lines between her eyebrows.

‘To Carrie’s.’

‘Why?’

Carrie heard Tommy swallow. Florrie could be intimidating and Tommy was usually so quiet, never one to answer back. ‘He has a job with me, Mum. And a place to stay.’

‘He has a place here. Why would he want to go with you to that place?’

Tommy pushed past Carrie and stood in front of Florrie. ‘To get some dignity back, Ma. I’m a man now, not a boy. I know why you want me here and it’s not ‘cause you want my company, is it? Don’t worry, I won’t leave you and Dad high and dry. Just think, one less mouth to feed. I would have thought you’d have been pleased.’

Florrie looked from one to the other, her lip curled in disgust. ‘Ungrateful. You two. Bloody ungrateful for what me and your dad have done for you.’

‘And what’s that?’ cried Carrie. ‘You sold me to the highest bidder and you’ve made our Tommy think he can’t do anything. Me and Pearl and Mrs Coyle, we nursed him back to health, not you. You...*you* should be grateful for that. If we’d have left him here he’d still be lying on that couch, that’s if he’d survived it.’

Florrie raised her hand to slap Carrie but Tommy pushed it down. ‘Don’t even think about it, Ma. The days when you thought you could do that are over and done with. We’re adults. We make our own decisions. I’m going back to Carrie’s and I’m going to ask Pearl to marry me. She’s a fine girl and she and I have an understanding. I’m sorry if you don’t like her, but I can’t live my life doing only what you want me to do. You might let our Alfie off the leash as well, while you’re at it. He’s a good kid but you’re too hard on him. And Dad come to that.’

Florrie looked around him to Carrie who said nothing.

‘This is your doing,’ she said, pointing an accusatory finger at her. ‘You’re a bad lot, Carrie Bateman, Dobbs, whatever you’re calling yourself these days. ‘You cause trouble wherever you go. I always knew it would be you. You don’t take after my side of the family, that’s for sure.’

‘No, Mum, I know I don’t,’ Carrie answered, her face implacable. ‘And I thank my lucky stars for that every day.’ She pushed Tommy in front of her and made for the front door, then turned to face Florrie again. ‘Have you ever thought you might be in the wrong, Mum? That treating people the way you do isn’t the right way? You belittle everyone you meet, not a good word leaves your lips.’ She shook her head in frustration. ‘I don’t understand why you’re so bitter. You have a good husband who has worked every hour God sends even though

he's not in the best of health, and four decent children. There are people out there suffering far more than you ever have. Honey and vinegar, Mum. Think about it.' She turned again and pushed the front door against the wall, opening it wide. 'Go on, Tommy.'

Tom nodded, and hefting his haversack on his shoulder and went out the front door. Carrie noticed there were tears in his eyes, but didn't say anything. 'Say goodbye to Dad for me,' he said over his shoulder, then Carrie slammed the door behind them.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, then Carrie glanced across at him. 'I'm so proud of you.'

'I'm not. She's an old lady.'

Carrie frowned. 'She's not old, Tommy. You think she's old because she's always looked that way, and it suits her to be like that. Dad's a bit older, but don't be worrying yourself about Florrie Dobbs. If there's one thing you can be sure of she knows how to take care of herself. She'll never go without. You don't get that stout if you're going without.'

A huge smile broke across his face. 'That's what I like about you, Carrie. You're an optimist.'

'Yep, I am. Had to be.'

'Was it awful in India? You don't speak of it much.'

Carrie shrugged and pulled a face. 'Sometimes it wasn't very nice, but it changed my life, Tommy, I think for the better. I met Dorothy, and Gita, and I still have half a business over in Secunderabad which helps fund Nightingale Lane. And I met David.'

'He's bad, isn't he?'

Carrie nodded, the huge sadness floating above her coming to rest on her shoulders. 'Yes, yes, he's bad.' She drew in a breath and released it slowly. 'He's...not the same.'

'Can they help him.'

She looked up at him and met his eyes with her own. 'I don't know.'



CARRIE WATCHED OUT of the window as Pearl and Tommy walked down Nightingale Lane to catch the tram for their first shift at the munitions factory in Silver Town. She smiled to herself as they talked, laughed, smiled, the two people she loved most in the world apart from her beloved son, had formed a bond, a love she hoped. Tommy had shocked her when he had told Florrie he wanted to ask Pearl to marry him. She'd hoped it wasn't just bravado, a surge of courage because Carrie was standing behind him. She decided not to mention it until he did, and then a few days after her visit to Hanbury Street,

he did. She held back, tried not to look too enthusiastic even though it was something she really wanted to happen because she felt it would bring them both happiness, particularly after what they had been through.

When Pearl lost William it had been touch and go whether she would ever be the same again, her mind was so fragile, but David had found a doctor in Bombay, Dr. Frazer who had pulled her through and for that she would always be grateful.

Tommy had been so dreadfully injured in the blast and subsequent fire at the tanning factory in Bermondsey he came close to losing his life, but Carrie and Pearl had nursed him back to health. Now, all that remained to remind him of that dreadful time was scarring on his cheek and damage to his leg which was crushed under a piece of machinery that had fallen on it. Some days he was in as much pain as he was then, but with careful nursing and some of Mrs. Coyle's tinctures from her herb garden they could alleviate some of the pain he experienced. They deserve some happiness, she thought as she lowered the lace curtain. If they're happy, so am I.



Chapter 45

‘How long are you planning to leave me here,’ David asked her as soon as she entered the drawing room at the Alexandria. Carrie had been heartened when she’d arrived. David was sitting in a wing chair, shaved and dressed, a pile of newspapers next to him, a cup of tea on an occasional table by his elbow. The tableaux that greeted her had given her optimism, but she quickly realised the reality was very different. David was in a bullish mood. She had kissed him on the forehead, saying a cheery hello, trying to lift the mood, hoping for some recognition of her concern for him, but he was having none of it.

‘I want you to get better, David. Don’t you?’

‘And you think shutting me away in this madhouse is the way to do it, do you? Or is it because you want me out of the way so you can converse and flirt with the other men you look after? I’ve seen how they look at you, following your skirts as you walk about the room.’

Carrie swallowed hard, her throat constricting as she tried not to cry. Crying never helped. David didn’t see the tears as they glistened on her eyelashes. It simply made him angry. ‘Why are you saying those things? I’ve never given you reason to feel that way. Nightingale Lane is my job, David, my business if you like. I give people work, women who wouldn’t survive if they didn’t have a job at Nightingale Lane. Mothers who have no training in anything, and with children who would starve or be sent away. David this isn’t you talking, I know it isn’t. Please try to understand.’

He turned and faced her, his cheeks hollow, his skin grey. ‘I do understand. I’m no good for you anymore. You think I won’t be able to give you the life I promised you when we were in India, that’s it, isn’t it? And you’ve put me in here to get me out of the way. I’ve talked to the other inmates of this prison. They feel exactly the same as me. Their wives and mothers have got shot of them because they say they’ve changed, yet we think all of you have changed. The love has gone from your eyes, Carrie. Once you looked at me with warmth, now it’s disdain. I expect you’ve found someone else. A girl like you wouldn’t have any trouble finding someone else. I fell for your charms, why wouldn’t another man.’ Carrie sat like a statue listening to David’s diatribe, distraught, dumbstruck, realising she could never reason with him. ‘I think you should go, and please, don’t come back. I don’t need your pity.’

‘David.’ She reached for him, but he turned from her and faced the window as though he couldn’t bear to look at her. ‘I love you, David. I

always will.' She waited for him to respond but it was as though she didn't exist.

Carrie cried all the way home. By the time she reached Nightingale Lane her eyes were red and swollen, and she knew she would never be able to hide it from the others. Pearl, Mrs. Coyle and Tommy looked up, their laughter suddenly cut short, the smiles dropping from their faces as she went into the warm kitchen that usually gave her so much comfort.

'What is it, Carrie?' asked Pearl. 'What's happened?'

She sank into a chair and hung her head. 'David doesn't want to see me anymore. He's told me not to go back to the Alexandria Hospital. He said I don't look at him with love in my eyes anymore.'

Tommy dragged a kitchen chair out from the table and sat beside her, then held her hand which he noticed was as cold as ice. 'You know he doesn't mean it, right? You know he doesn't know what he's saying?'

Carrie shook her head. 'It doesn't matter if he means it or not. He's told the doctors he doesn't want visitors, not even Dorothy and Marcus.'

'What did the doctors say?'

'That it's his choice and they can't go against his wishes. He's even signed something to say that it's his request and it's not being imposed on him.'

'Have you tried speaking to him, talking him out of his decision?'

'He wouldn't speak to me, turned away from me as though he didn't know me. I asked the doctor's if it could be overruled if it was in his best interests to have visitors and they said no. His mind, as we knew him, might be damaged, but generally he is sound. He made the decision with no coercion. There's nothing I can do, nothing anyone can do.'

Later that day, after Pearl and Tommy had left for Silver Town, Dorothy and Marcus visited Nightingale Lane. Dorothy looked as though she had been crying and Marcus was pale.

'He won't see us, darling,' Dorothy said as she swept as elegantly as she could at almost nine months pregnant. She went into the sitting room and promptly sat, kicking off her Mary-Janes and massaging her swollen ankles. 'We were turned away at the door.' Marcus glanced at her. 'Well, almost. We got as far as his bedroom door then one of the nurses came running down the corridor towards us, asking us not to go any further. When I asked her why she said that David had informed them that he didn't want visitors...at all.'

Carrie followed them into the room and sat opposite Dorothy, nervously twisting her fingers together in her lap. 'I know, Dorothy. I went to see him earlier today and he informed me himself that he

didn't want to see me again. After, when I spoke to the doctors, they told me it was a blanket request, not just me. He didn't want to see anyone.'

'But why? I don't understand. We're his friends. Why would he not want to see us, especially you? And Marcus. We've known him for years.'

'But he's not the David we've known for years,' said Marcus. 'He's not the same man. He has been terribly affected by his experiences at the front, men he has known for many years in the military blown to bits in front of his eyes, screaming in agony and David unable to help them. I would say it's quite likely he has survivors' guilt, feels like he's let them all down because he made it through and they didn't. Things over there have escalated beyond anything you would imagine, and he has been in the thick of it. It doesn't bode well. It doesn't bode well at all.'

'What about you, Marcus,' asked Carrie. 'Will you have to return?'

'Yes, but not yet. I'm more involved with training officers these days, but yes, I'll need to return. At some point.'

'Maybe not the best time to have a baby,' Dorothy murmured, almost to herself.

'It's always a good time and never a good time,' said Carrie, finding a smile for her friend. 'That's what they say on the streets.' Dorothy nodded, understanding the sentiment. 'But when you have yours we should celebrate. All we get is bad news these days. If we can't get excited over a new baby I don't know what we can get excited about.'

Dorothy and Marcus glanced at each other. 'And what about you, darling. What are you going to do?'

Carrie breathed in and closed her eyes. When she opened them both Dorothy and Marcus were staring at her. 'Nothing.'

'Nothing?' repeated Dorothy.

'There's nothing I can do. I've tried everything. When David was here I nursed, cajoled, even tried pleading with him to understand that I still loved him and always would, regardless of what had happened to him. I told him that if he'd returned physically impaired, no matter what it was I would still love him, but he heard none of it. I've thought about it so much. I've gone whole nights with no sleep because I want to do the right thing by him, and yes, there is a feeling of guilt that he's in a nursing hospital and it's the one thing he didn't want, but there wasn't an alternative. I did what I did because I thought it was for the best. All I can hope for now is that he will get better, that his doctors are able to do something for him, then maybe I'll get him back. If he doesn't improve, then his refusal to allow me to visit him is his decision, but I want you to both know that I love him

as much as I ever did...and I always will, even if he never wants to see me again. I'll always love David.

Dorothy reached out to Carrie and gripped her hand. 'We know, Carrie. We know.'

The following day, on the 10th January, just before dawn, Dorothy gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. Exhausted after the birth, Carrie offered to take care of Seraphina and Dottie at Nightingale Lane while Dorothy was in hospital.

'It'll be about ten days,' said Marcus, leaving the girls in the hall and watching them run into the kitchen, giggling, a look of relief on his face. 'She had a difficult time, but she's alright. You know Dorothy. She's as tough as they come.'

'But she'll need help, Marcus, especially now you have two babies instead of one. What a shock for you.'

'Yes, the boy was hiding behind his sister. In shock, certainly, but so delighted, Carrie. I can't wait to get them home.'

'The girls can stay here. We've loads of room. A couple of the boys were well enough to go home yesterday, and we're not due to receive any more until next month. I'm not sorry to be honest. We're all exhausted and it'll be lovely for John to have his favourite playmates here. And don't forget, Marcus, when Dorothy does return home, if there's anything I can do...'

Marcus nodded. 'I know. I expect you'll all be visiting to coo over the new babes. I'm sure Dorothy will be grateful for any help and advice. Between you and me I think she's a bit nervous about being left on her own with them.'

Carrie laughed. 'Yeah, I remember that. It's nerve-wracking. She'll be fine. I'll do what I can.'



TEN DAYS LATER, DOROTHY returned home to Victoria Square. Marcus insisted she went to bed, but Carrie encouraged Dorothy to become active as soon as she could. She suggested a bath while she looked after the babies for an hour, and then to wear a dress that made her feel good. A trip to a hairdresser was arranged, and the application of some rouge to cheeks and lips.

'Honestly, Dorothy, it'll make you feel better. You should try to get back to normal as soon as you can. When's the nurse coming?'

'This afternoon. Marcus is being a bit too careful with me, don't you think? He'd make me stay in bed for a month if he had his way.'

Carrie smiled. 'He loves you, and wants to look after you. It's so lovely, Dorothy. Make the most of it. I remember when I had John. Arnold barely looked at him, or me for that matter. It should have

been one of the best times of my life, the most memorable.' She chuckled. 'Well, it was, but for all the wrong reasons.'

'Do you hate him?'

Carrie shrugged. 'I've felt hate for him. Is that the same?'

'I don't think it is. I don't think it's easy to truly hate someone. Usually they have some saving grace, although I'm not sure Arnold Bateman possesses one of those.'

'No, nor me.' Carrie folded some towelling nappies, shook out some muslins and rearranged Dorothy's dressing table. Then she fiddled with the curtain tiebacks and adjusted the lace at the windows.

'Do you ever stop?' asked Dorothy, shaking her head. 'You're never still, Carrie, always changing this or that, making good everything around you. Why? Why don't you ever rest?'

Carrie pulled a smile that didn't reach her eyes. 'It stops me thinking about David. The night-times are the worst. I get no rest from it. Every time I close my eyes I see him, the way he used to be, then the image is replaced with how he is now, grey, hollow eyed, hollow cheeked, uncertain of everything. I have nightmares, too. I've managed to do without proper sleep for so long, it's like my body doesn't need it anymore.'

Dorothy looked thoughtful. She glanced at Carrie as though she wanted to say something, then changed her mind and looked away. Carrie smiled to herself. 'Yes, Dorothy?' She looked up at her friend. 'What was it you wanted to say?'

'I don't want to upset you any more than you are already, Carrie, but...I hope you won't waste your life. You're still very young, still beautiful, you could meet someone else. It's bad enough David's life will change, has changed, and who knows what will happen. As your friend, a dear friend I hope, I just want you to be happy. I hope you'll consider what I'm saying is from someone who cares about you. And David.'

Carrie went to the bed and sat facing Dorothy. She leant forward and took her hand, smiling, knowing how important Dorothy's friendship was to her.

'I hear what you're saying, Dorothy...and I have considered it. It's just that I can't imagine loving anyone as much as I love David, and if I can't love them in that way then should I love them at all? I've promised David I'll wait for him, no matter how long it takes.' She chuckled. 'I'm praying so hard that if He doesn't hear me He needs a hearing aid.'

Dorothy laughed. 'I didn't realise you were a Believer.'

'I am lately. I think it's all I have left. I've never asked Him for anything in the past. Hopefully He'll look after David, wrap him in

love and make him better. I have to believe that, don't I?'

Dorothy nodded, then looked worried. 'There's something else, Carrie. Something I've wanted to tell you, even before I had the twins but you had so much on your plate...I couldn't bring myself to say it.'

Carrie's eyes widened and she leant forward, perplexed, suspecting something had befallen the new twins. 'What, Dorothy? What is it, please tell me for goodness sake?'

'There's no way to make this sound better than it is, darling. Arnold Bateman's unit is coming back to England in a month.'

Carrie's mouth dropped open. Arnold was so far away, so entrenched in a country that had taken weeks to reach, she had been able to forget about him. Sometimes, if she ever dreamed of Secunderabad, Arnold would be in the background, almost a shadow, dark, unformed, like a cloud of seething vapour. Her life was now so different from the one she had lived with him in India it was almost as if it had all happened to someone else. Her relationship with Gita still blossomed, they wrote often, but Arnold was never mentioned; the only references to the military was when a ball took place at the Secunderabad Club and the wives of the soldiers wanted a new dress or shoes. Gita would relay all this information to Carrie, amusing gossip about the wives, even some of the women Carrie had met, while, Carrie was aware, carefully and neatly side-stepping any mention of Arnold Bateman, Carrie's estranged husband.

She sucked in a breath and rose from the bed, wobbling as she went to the window for air. She sensed trouble, a premonition of darkness that Arnold would bring with him from so far away. He was still her husband, they had not divorced, only parted on the agreement that Carrie wouldn't reveal Arnold's proclivity; his preference for men. Would that agreement stand her in good stead when he came back to England demanding his rights. And what were his rights? Could he demand half of everything she owned, or...everything she had acquired through her hard work, the house, even her half of the business in Secunderabad? Could he demand to be given admittance to 99 Nightingale Lane, to own it, live in it; to change everything she'd achieved?

Dorothy watched Carrie, her breath held in her chest at the change in her friend. 'Carrie?'

Carrie turned to her, her face pale, her lip quivering. 'Oh, Dorothy. I'm scared.'

Dorothy slid out of bed and went across to the window. She put her arm around Carrie's shoulders and held her close. 'No, darling, shush, it'll be alright, I promise. We won't let anything happen to you.'

Carrie looked up at her with eyes misted with tears. 'But what if he

wants everything? What if he demands to live at Nightingale Lane? Can I say no?’

Dorothy squeezed her. ‘You need a lawyer, a man of letters to help you. My advice is to wait and see what happens on his return.’ She pulled Carrie to the sofa and they sat close, heads together. ‘He might be as quiet as a lamb when he returns. Don’t forget you know something about him he will not want anyone in England to know. He’s ambitious and will want to make a good name for himself. If his preferences get out he’ll be finished. He’s not stupid, Carrie. And I know about him and what happened in your marriage, as does David.’

‘And Marcus?’ Dorothy nodded. ‘Why hasn’t he told anyone? He’s a high-ranking officer.’

‘Because he’s as aware as I am that all the time you have this information he can’t hurt you. If it gets out and disputed and he wins, you won’t have a leg to stand on.’

‘So it needs to stay under wraps.’

Dorothy nodded again. ‘I think it’s best for now. The ball is in his court. If he plays it you know what you must do.’

‘And if he wins?’

Dorothy shrugged. ‘We mustn’t let him. It would be a travesty...and you’ve been praying haven’t you?’ She smiled at Carrie and Carrie chuckled.

‘Yes, more than I ever have.’

‘So let’s hope it has stood you in good stead. Don’t be scared, Carrie. That’s not the Carrie I know.’



THE TWINS CHRISTENING took place at St. Peter’s Church near Dorothy and Marcus’ home in Victoria Square. Carrie was godmother, and David, godfather, although in his absence. It was a wonderful occasion, the twins behaved beautifully without a peep, and when their names were announced by the presiding vicar, a secret until the great day, everyone was all smiles. Sebastian and Violet, a nod to Carrie’s name, were blessed in front of friends and family, and Carrie, although sad that David could not attend was thrilled at being asked.

Back at Victoria Square, Dorothy took Carrie aside. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine, Dorothy, and so happy for you. You and Marcus look very contented.’

Dorothy smiled. ‘We are. The twins have brought us so much joy, and with the help of Nurse Field they’ve added a new dimension to our lives. It’s funny, I had always thought Marcus and I would not be blessed with children, but here we are.’

‘It must be lovely to have a full-time nurse. At least you can do

some of the things you want to do.'

'Well, not all. Marcus has asked me to promise...no more rallies until the twins are older. Anyway, The Women's Social and Political Union have taken on board the needs of a country at war. Our rallies have been put on hold until things change and the war nears its end. We need to find more homes for Belgian refugees, which is what I wanted to talk to you about.'

Carrie frowned but was curious. 'Oh?'

'It began in 1914. The refugees from Belgium came across in their droves, about 250,000 so far, when their country was overrun by the Bosch. Is there a chance you might have room for a family of refugees. They've gone through so much, Carrie and we're struggling to find everyone places. It's as if all the residents of Belgium have upped sticks and come across to England. We have a number of families of Jewish Belgians who can't return to their homeland yet because it's far too dangerous for them. What do you think? Can you help?'

Carrie thought for a moment. 'I would love to help, Dorothy. We have some spaces at Nightingale Lane, and I'm yet to open the attic rooms. Would they be suitable, spruced up and made warm and pleasant of course? It's where Pearl and I used to sleep when we were maids.'

Dorothy's eyes filled with tears.' Oh, Carrie. How did you do it, darling?'

Carrie couldn't help laughing. 'We weren't in the jungle sleeping on leaves, Dorothy. It was perfectly alright, and it was where I met Pearl, so I'm grateful for my time there. You're so funny, and sweet. And I think those tears are baby tears. We all have them after we've given birth. The attic bedrooms are really quite nice, and with a bit of care and attention could be turned into two apartments for families to stay in. Yes, yes, we'll help, of course we will.'

'Thank you, Carrie. So many people need help. And I knew you'd say yes, you're such a good egg.' She turned and made to greet another guest, then thought of something. 'And...have you heard anything from you know who?'

Carrie puffed out a breath. 'No, but I'm sure I will. And there'll be someone else awaiting his return with anticipation as well as me.'

Dorothy tilted her head and knotted her brows. 'Surely he's not that popular. I can't imagine why anyone would anticipate that man's return.'

'She's not waiting for him because she wants him to return. I would imagine she's dreading it.'

'Who, Carrie?'

'My mother. Florrie. He paid her, didn't he, before we came out to Secunderabad. Gave her money so he would have a wife to make him

look like a family man. And he got two for the price of one, bearing in mind I was pregnant with John, not that he cared a jot for him.'

'Will he want his money back?'

'That's what she's worried about.'

'And does she know about...his other life?'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, but I've been sorely tempted to tell her, especially when she goes on about what a good man he is and that I should have stayed where I was because it was the best place for me. She'll have the shock of her life if she ever does find out, but knowing Florrie, she'd rather believe him over me.'

'Was it a lot of money?'

'I think it was a tidy sum. I asked her once but she dodged the question and my father took himself out, embarrassed I expect. He's a lovely man, but too soft by half. She walks all over him and I know if it had been left to him I would never have married just because I was pregnant, particularly to someone who was on his way to India of all places. He made it quite plain he didn't like Arnold Bateman, and even though he voiced his feelings Florrie would have none of it. She'd decided and that was that. Dad would have let me stay at home and sod the neighbours and their gossip. If Arnold does want some of his money back he'll have to whistle for it. They've got nothing, although heaven only knows where the money he gave Florrie went.'



Chapter 46

‘What the hell was that?’ Mrs Coyle ran into the dispensary where Carrie was stashing their newest supply of saline and analgesics, lifesavers for cleaning the wounds of soldiers in their care, and for halting the pain that would leave them crying out for their mothers. Carrie often wondered how some of the boys had ever survived the fighting at the front, faced with an enemy who were very likely as scared as they were, when even in convalescence they were convinced they were going to die. None of them had while at Nightingale Lane and Carrie was proud that they had sent so many boys home or back to the front, even though she regretted their returning to the place of war.

She suddenly stopped and listened, her hands that held brown glass bottles of medication in mid-air, and stared at Mrs. Coyle. ‘It sounded like an explosion.’ Carrie pushed the bottles haphazardly onto the dresser and ran into the sitting room, Mrs. Coyle following, to look out of the window. ‘Do you think it was a bomb?’

Mrs Coyle shook her head. ‘I’ve never heard no bomb like that before. Came out of nowhere, not like the other air raids. Wouldn’t we have had a warning at the very least, or the sound of engines like we usually do?’

Carrie frowned. She watched as people left their homes and stood out in the street looking towards the skies. ‘I think everyone thinks the same. The other residents are outside looking for bombers but there’s nothing. And as you say, there would have been a warning.’ She shook her head. ‘I wonder what it was?’

‘Should we get the boys into the shelter, do you think, send some of the walking wounded to the Tube? They might be using the Zeppelins again. Could never hear them could we, before they dropped their bombs?’

Carrie shook her head. ‘No...no, I don’t think that’s necessary. Let’s wait and see. Oh, wait a minute, there’s one of the new wardens. He’s talking to some of the residents.’ She turned from the window and ran into the hall. ‘I’m going to find out what’s happened.’

Carrie lifted her skirts and ran down the three steps in front of the house. She approached the group of residents that had gathered in the road, then spotted a neighbour, a woman she was on speaking terms with.

‘Mrs. Brown? What’s happened? What was that noise?’

Mrs Brown covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes etched

with dread. 'Oh, Mrs Bateman, there's been a huge explosion in Silver Town, at the munitions factory. It's blown the factory to pieces and all the houses close by have been destroyed.' Carrie felt her legs turn to jelly. She wanted to ask the woman what time the explosion took place but couldn't find her voice. Mrs Brown touched her arm, dismayed at Carrie's response. 'Mrs. Bateman? Are you alright, my dear?'

Carrie nodded, breathless with fear. 'What time...? What time did it happen?'

Mrs Brown called the warden over and asked him the same question. He looked as shaken as Carrie felt. 'Six fifty-two, just after the afternoon shift had finished,' he said, his voice wobbling.

'Was anyone hurt?' asked Carrie, dreading the answer.

'Oh, yes, many. The change-over had already taken place. There are casualties. It's a terrible business. Our loyal men and women working for the war effort and now this happens. There will be deaths. Some of those on the top floor were caught in the blast. They wouldn't have known what hit 'em.'

Carrie turned from them and ran back to the house, her legs almost giving way. Mrs Coyle met her in the hall, her cheeks wobbling with fear at the look on Carrie's face. 'What is it, ducky? What's happened?'

Carrie held onto the wall as she gasped out her answer. 'It's the munitions factory at Silver Town. There's been a massive explosion. Oh, Mrs Coyle. Mrs Coyle...'

Ida Coyle ran forward and put an arm around her waist. 'They might be alright, sweetheart. They might be alright. When did it happen?'

'Eight minutes to seven.'

'And when did their shift end?'

'Half-past six.'

Mrs Coyle sat Carrie on the sofa in the sitting room and squeezed her ample body in next to her. 'So,' she shook her head as she considered Pearl and Tommy and whether they would have been at the factory, 'they'll be alright then, won't they? Most of 'em can't wait to get out of there of an evening, 'specially on the weekend and our two won't be any different.'

'Why aren't they home then?' Carrie looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'Half past seven. They should be walking through that door about now, looking for tea and biscuits.'

'We'll wait, darlin'. We'll wait for them to come home.'

They sat together, waiting, their hands entwined, their ears waiting for the sound of Tommy's key in the front door. They waited until eight o'clock, then half past eight. When the hands on the clock reached nine, Ida Coyle stood.

‘We should make some enquiries. Perhaps they’re helping out with the casualties. You know what Pearl’s like. She couldn’t walk away when someone’s in pain or needs help.’

‘Should we go there, do you think, to Silver Street?’

Mrs Coyle nodded. ‘If we’re allowed to, or if the roads are clear enough. Sounds like it was devastating. Not sure we’ll get a tram, Carrie. They might not be running bearing in mind how far the blast devastated. The streets around the factory will no doubt be closed.’

‘We must try though, mustn’t we, just in case.’

‘Yes, of course, ducky.’ Mrs Coyle nodded again, her eyes brimming with tears she brushed away with her apron so that Carrie wouldn’t see them. ‘Yes, we must try, just in case.’



TOMMY WAITED FOR PEARL just inside the factory gates in Silver Town. They’d arranged to meet after their shift which ended at six-thirty in the evening. She was late, gossiping with her friends he expected, so he sighed, chuckled to himself, and lit another cigarette to pass the time until she arrived.

He nodded goodnight to the other workers as they went by, some walking, some cycling, alone and in pairs, some turning left outside the gates to go into Silver Town, some right, making their way to the pub. Groups of girls walked by quickly, arm in arm, chatting about this and that and what they would do at the weekend, giggling as they passed him, their eyes sliding in his direction, appreciating the handsome guy with the scar on his cheek that made him even more mysterious.

Tommy was known as the quiet one, the one who smiled and nodded but didn’t say much. He thought his shyness and inability to make small talk probably put him at a disadvantage, but unknown to him it made him an even more attractive prospect. Not from him the cheeky chat up lines, the invitations to the pub after work, the eyeing up of the girls on his shift. He simply turned up, would join in conversations when invited, then go home. It was all he wanted, to work and earn a decent wage, to be part of the war effort, to go back to his room in Nightingale Lane...and Pearl.

Pearl was the sunshine in his life. All around him was grey, the buildings, the streets, particularly where Florrie and Arthur lived in Hanbury Street, the people who were bowed down by poverty and fear of war and what it was doing to their lives, wondering if it would ever be the same again. The bombing had increased; every day new reports would come through about areas of the coast that had been demolished by bombing raids and every person who lived and

breathed wondered if that very day would be their last.

The young men left in the streets were either in reserved occupations, had been injured at the front and could not return, or were conscientious objectors. When Tommy had been given the white feather by a woman he had never seen before or since, it had broken his heart. There was nothing worse in his eyes than a coward, a man who would allow his brothers, his friends, the ordinary man down the pub to go off to war, to risk his life in the mud and trenches of France to save his country, and not do his bit himself. He had wanted to go from the beginning of the war in 1914, but his age had prevented him, but he had promised himself that as soon as he came of age or started to look older than his years, whichever came first, he would enlist. But then came the fire at the tanning factory, the one that changed his life forever, along with his plans to join up. In his heart he wasn't a coward, and certainly not a conscientious objector, but people on the streets didn't know what was in his heart. All they saw was a man young enough to fight for his country who wasn't where he ought to be. They chose not to see the scars, didn't think about how he might have come by them, and ignored his pronounced limp. He'd shouted after the woman after she'd pushed the feather on to him that he wasn't allowed to go to war, but she wasn't interested. She was too busy looking for her next victim, a man who may or may not have deserved the white feather.

How he had felt that day, the misplaced guilt, the sorrow because of the inadequacies in his body his injuries had brought, had stayed with him for weeks, and every time an injured soldier was given admittance to Nightingale Lane his melancholy crowded in on him even more. After a new intake where one of the soldiers was crying in pain, a boy, clearly not of age who had lied to get to the front, Tommy decided he couldn't face his guilt anymore which was why he returned to Hanbury Street. The prospect had daunted him; Florrie was far from sympathetic and he knew that any welcome he received would be because he would bring his savings with him, but at least he didn't have to confront the guilt at being a young man who didn't go to war.

He threw the cigarette end onto the floor and ground it out with his heel, glancing at his watch. Ten minutes to seven. Everyone on their floor had left the factory. He smiled shaking his head, wondering what on earth girls found to talk about, then he saw her, running down the wooden steps from the first floor of the factory towards him. She'd changed out of her work clothes into a primrose-yellow dress that swished around her legs as she ran. Her beautiful red hair shone, released from the grimy scarf she wore in the factory, and her face and hands were free of the grease and dirt they encountered every day. His heart leapt when he saw her, realising she was late because

she cared how she looked for him. He smiled broadly, the love he had for her filling every part of him.

The Silver Town factory exploded at eight minutes to seven on Friday the seventh of January. The force of the blast swept him out of the gates and into the road that ran alongside the factory. His ears rang with piercing white noise, the pain almost unbearable, as pieces of detritus; glass, brick and wood fell around and on top of him, cutting him across his eyebrow and filling his mouth and nose with dust and pieces of brick and grit. He lay still for a few moments, the realisation of what had happened not registering until his heart had stopped clanging in his chest like a funeral bell. When the debris had stopped falling there was silence, an eerie quiet, unnatural in its density, until a siren sounded, one he knew from the bombing raids, signalling a disaster had occurred in the parish.

He leant up painfully on one elbow, peering through the falling dust that was as thick as a London fog. He narrowed his eyes, lines of dust making crows' feet, squinting into the greyness, the outline of buildings in the far distance muted as though under water, until he saw a figure, prone against the flagstones, a sweep of red hair splayed out around it, and a primrose-yellow dress, its colour dulled by a thick layer of brick dust.

'Pearl!' Tommy's voice was barely a croak, his throat was so full of dust. He tried to lever himself to a sitting position but a sharp flash of pain tore through his leg. He heaved onto the stones beside him, vomiting the dust he'd swallowed and was still breathing in. He look across at Pearl again. She hadn't moved and a terrible thought occurred to him. 'Please don't be dead,' he said under his breath that rasped into his throat. 'Please, God, don't take, Pearl. Please don't be dead.'

He hefted himself up onto his good leg, looking around for a piece of wood he could use as a crutch. He leant forward and retrieved a plank that looked sturdy enough to hold him, got to his knees and levered himself up. He began a slow hobbling walk over to where Pearl was laying, and as he reached her, people came out of nowhere, running towards him, arms outstretched. Firemen appeared, jumping off fire engines that had hurtled into the street from fire stations from other towns.

He heard someone say that the blast had damaged hundreds of buildings, including the local fire station and St. Barnabus' Church, that people had been left homeless and the blast had been seen and heard miles away. He dropped to the ground next to Pearl and pushed her hair away from her face which was unmarked by the blast. He put his head against her chest, silently praying she was breathing. 'Pearl,' he whispered. 'Pearl, please, sweetheart.'

Two ambulance men knelt beside him, one taking his arm.

‘Let us look after her, sir. We’ll look after her now, get her to hospital.’

‘Is she...’ Tommy swallowed the vomit rising in his throat. ‘Is she dead?’

One of the men put a finger against Pearl’s neck. ‘She has a pulse...not very strong. We need to move her, get her some medical care.’ He glanced at Tommy and frowned. ‘And you, sir. You need some attention.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ said Tommy. ‘I’m not leaving her.’

The men nodded. They lifted Pearl gently onto a stretcher, wrapped her in a grey, army issue blanket and carried her to the ambulance. Tommy hobbled towards the ambulance behind them, thanking a God with whom he had no relationship for keeping his beloved Pearl alive, and praying to Him that she would stay that way.



CARRIE LEFT JOHN WITH Francis, Ida Coyle’s daughter who worked as a daily at number ninety-nine, who’d promised to stay with him until they returned, and she and Mrs. Coyle made their way down Nightingale Lane to the tram stop on the main road.

‘Where you going, missus?’ the driver asked as it pulled up.

‘We want to go to Silver town,’ replied Carrie.

He whistled and shook his head. ‘Not today, love, nor any other day for a while I shouldn’t wonder. I can take you as far as Limehouse. You’ll have to walk from there on. What you going there for? There’s been an explosion at the munitions factory. No place for ladies.’

Carrie and Mrs Coyle ignored him and got on the tram. When they got to Limehouse they disembarked, then hurried as fast as they could towards Silver Town.

‘We’ve a bit of a walk,’ puffed Mrs Coyle. ‘We might have been better going on the Underground.’

‘Does it go that far yet?’

Mrs Coyle shook her head, her cheeks getting redder and redder, her breath shorter and shorter. ‘Oh, I dunno, ducky. I can’t keep up with these new-fangled modern things. The tram or horse and carriage was always good enough for me in my day.’

The closer they got to Silver Town the more the evidence of the explosion became apparent. There were fires everywhere, with clusters of firemen attempting to put them out and ambulancemen with Red Cross armbands attending to the wounded. All of the buildings around them had the windows blown out, and the streets could hardly be identified they were so covered in mounds of bricks

and wood.

Mrs Coyle grabbed Carrie's arm just as they got near to the factory. 'Should we be here, do you think? I'm not sure we should be here.'

'If they've been hurt then we need to know where they've been taken. I'll ask someone.' Carrie ran across to two ambulancemen who were attending a fireman who had been overcome by fumes coming from the factory, then ran back to Mrs Coyle. 'The injured have been taken to the hospital in Poplar. We should go there. I won't be happy until I know what's happened to Tommy and Pearl.'

'You might not be happy when you know what's happened, either,' Mrs Coyle muttered under her breath as she turned to go back the way she came and surveyed the chaotic scenes around them. 'But at least it's on the way back to Limehouse. We can get a tram home from there when we've found them.'



IT TOOK THEM OVER AN hour and a half to get to the hospital in Poplar. They would have reached it sooner had Mrs Coyle not insisted on stopping every few hundred yards to catch her breath. The big woman wasn't used to walking anywhere as she hardly ever left Nightingale Lane, and if she did it was only to visit the outdoor markets to buy supplies.

'I'm fair bushed,' she gasped when they got to the gates of the East India Docks which were just outside the hospital. 'I 'ope they've got a spare bed in there,' she said as she bent over to ease a stitch in her side. 'I'll be needing one meself.'

'I hope we find them, Mrs Coyle,' said Carrie, her voice almost a whisper. 'And I hope they're alright. They've both been through so much already. Why did this have to happen?'

'It's life, ducky. Throws things at us to test us. To see how strong we are.'

'Yeah, well I'm bloody well fed up with it. I just want them to be alright.'

Mrs Coyle glanced at Carrie. She wasn't sure everything was going to be alright. It was serious, that she knew. What she'd seen at Silver Town had shocked her; the devastation, the amount of people wounded and made homeless because of the blast. If Tommy and Pearl weren't at the hospital she assumed they were underneath a pile of rubble in Silver Town and had yet to be found. How Carrie would cope with losing the brother she loved so much, and Pearl, her best friend, after the admittance of Captain Lawrence to a nursing home was in the lap of the Gods. They were in the middle of a war, a war they thought would be over by Christmas 1914, and many had lost

their lives during the intervening years. Why should luck be on their side when it had deserted so many? She saw it every day at Nightingale Lane, young men, their lives changed for ever by their injuries or the awful things they'd seen during the fighting. Some of them would never be the same again. Yes, they'd survived, but many of them were sent back to France to fight again once they were fit enough. No one knew if they ever made it back home again.



THE HOSPITAL WAS BUSTLING with activity; ambulances pulled up every few minutes, medical staff rushing out to meet the injured and help take them inside.

'Do you think we should go in?' Carrie asked Mrs Coyle.

'We can try. If they stop us we can ask them about Pearl and Tommy.'

'I feel bad watching all this going on and not doing anything.'

'They know what they're doing, Carrie. Let's find someone we can talk to.'

They went to a desk in the wide foyer, which was three or four people deep, all wanting the same thing as Carrie and Mrs Coyle. Women carrying infants were waiting to find out about their husbands, men worrying about their missing wives, mothers and fathers, all looking for loved ones, praying, just as Carrie was that they would be safe and well.

They stood at the back of the group to wait their turn, then heard the sound of a voice they recognised.

'Carrie?'

Carrie turned then ran towards Tommy who had left one of the wards and entered the foyer from a corridor lined with trolleys and victims of the blast, flinging her arms around him and holding him close, not saying anything, the tears rolling down her face as she pressed her cheek against his chest.

'You're alright,' she said, her voice breaking with tears. 'You're alright.' He gently pushed her away from him and stared at her as though trying to send her a message. Her eyes widened and she looked behind him. 'Where's Pearl?'

Mrs Coyle joined them and put a hand on his arm. 'Where's Pearl, ducky?' she said in a motherly voice.

He inclined his head towards the ward. 'In there. Injured. Badly injured. They're not sure she'll make it, Carrie. It's strange, there's not a mark on her. It's all inside. The blast hit her so badly it's damaged her internal organs.'

'Is she awake?' Carrie asked in a whisper.

‘No. Unconscious.’ He shook his head. ‘She looked so pretty too. It’s why we were late coming out of the factory. I was waiting for her at the gates. Everyone else had left. She came running down the steps from the first floor. She’d cleaned up in one of the cubicles, washed her hands and face and changed into that yellow dress she knows I love. I remember watching her, thinking how lucky I was to have met her, and that I should tell her how I felt about her. The next thing I knew I was lying in the road covered in wood and brick dust. My ears are still ringing from the blast. I can hardly hear anything. When I managed to lean up on my elbow I saw her, laying on the flagstones in the courtyard. The building was gone, just bits of metal sticking up out of the ground, and there were bodies of workers who were on the top floor lying amongst the rubble. There was fire everywhere. I could even hear people screaming who were trapped under the debris.’ He rubbed the tears from his eyes, smearing soot across his face. ‘It was bloody awful, Carrie,’ he cried, his voice throaty and rasping. ‘I thought the fire at the tannery was bad, but this was something else.’

‘Have they said anything? Will she...is she...going to be alright? I mean, she’s not going to die, is she?’

He pressed his face into his hands. ‘I don’t know, Carrie. They said she had a fifty-fifty chance of pulling through, not very good odds, are they? If luck is on her side she might make it, but...’ he shrugged. ‘I don’t think anyone knows.’



THEY WALKED TO THE tram stop, Carrie and Ida Coyle supporting Tommy between them. There were no streetlamps to light their way, every one of them had been blown out by the blast and the area was pitch black. Tommy had been patched up as best as could be achieved under the circumstances, a piece of gauze kept in place with plasters across his eyebrow where it had been stitched by a young nurse whose hands had shaken through the whole thing. Tommy ignored it. He assumed she’d probably seen some sights that night she’d never encountered before, and tried to make light of his injuries, but was glad when it was over. The three of them stood in the darkness, waiting for the tram to arrive. Carrie worried that the service had been stopped because of the disaster at the factory and wondered how they would get Tommy home if it had.

A Ford motor car pulled up some way away from the tram stop, its engine idling, the exhaust puffing out plumes of vapour into the cold air. Carrie couldn’t see the driver, but suddenly Mrs Coyle threw up her hands with apparent joy.

‘It’s Master Johan.’ She turned to Carrie, a huge smile across her

face. 'You remember him, Carrie, Master Johan, the Stern boy, well, not a boy no more. I wondered what had happened to that young man. I think he's recognised us.' She lifted her skirts and almost ran towards the car, waving animatedly, her smile still stretched wide. 'Master Johan. It's Mrs. Coyle.'

Carrie watched with her heart in her mouth as Johan Stern got out of the car and walked towards Mrs Coyle who was standing on the pavement. She saw him clutch Mrs Coyle's hands as they exchanged greetings, then as she pointed to Carrie and Tommy standing like statues in the dark, both dreading the moment Johan Stern offered to take them home to the house he once lived in.

Ida Coyle hurried back to them as Johan stood next to the car, waiting for them.

'He was going home when he saw us standing at the tram stop. When he saw Tommy he assumed he'd been caught in the explosion at the factory and wants to take us home. I told him what happened to Tommy, and about Pearl. I feel quite heady,' she said. 'I've never travelled in a motor car before.'

'Maybe we should wait for the tram, Mrs Coyle. We don't want to put him out,' said Carrie, trying not to look at Johan.

'Oh, no, he said it's alright. He lives on Victoria Square. Isn't that where Captain and Mrs Tremaine live? Anyway, come on, ducky. We'll be home in a jiffy. And it'll be so much better for Tommy to go home in some comfort instead of a rickety old tram.'

Carrie knew she'd lost the argument. She glanced up at Tommy who shrugged, then allowed himself to be helped towards the car. Johan Stern opened the door to the back seat, smiling as he did so, then helped Tommy to sit inside.

'Would you like to sit in the front?' he asked Carrie, who shook her head.

'Oh, no. Thank you. I'll sit in the back with Tommy. Mrs Coyle will sit in the front.' She knew she wouldn't get any argument from Ida Coyle who couldn't wait to slip into the shiny leather front passenger seat. 'Er, thank you for offering to take us.'

Johan smiled and Carrie felt her stomach somersault as he answered her with a smooth, refined voice. 'It's no trouble, Carrie. No trouble whatsoever.'



SHE STARED AT THE BACK of his head as he drove smoothly towards Nightingale Lane. She'd registered the shock in his face when he realised he would be taking them to the house his family once owned, observed him as the cogs and wheels of his mind carried out the

machinations to accept that somehow she had found a way to acquire the house of his childhood. She watched his eyes narrow in the rear-view mirror when he asked to where he was taking them, her stomach churning at his look of shock that he struggled to replace with nonchalance.

‘You’re back at the old house then?’ he’d asked her airily.

She’d nodded. ‘Yes, back at number ninety-nine.’

He’d turned to Mrs Coyle. ‘And you’re still the cook, Mrs Coyle?’

‘Oh, yes, Master Stern. Still cooking. It’s what I do best.’

He’d nodded and smiled then looked into the mirror and found her eyes. ‘And you, Carrie. You’re still the maid?’

She’d turned and looked out of the window into the darkness. ‘I run the house as a convalescence home for injured soldiers.’ She decided it was enough of an explanation, then felt his stare as he clearly wondered if she had been the purchaser. She had acquired the house under her new name, Mrs. Arnold Bateman, confident that the Sterns would never find out who the buyer actually was. When she got out of the car outside the house she saw his eyes go to her left hand and to the wedding ring she still wore to give her the correct amount of status as a woman living as a single person; to maintain her acceptability in the social mores of 1917 England. As they walked Tommy into the house she turned and thanked Johan for his assistance.

‘I’m glad things worked out for you, Carrie,’ he said, his voice back to its smooth charm.

She lifted the corners of her mouth in a half-smile that didn’t reach her eyes. ‘I’ve never been happier, and very glad to be back in the old house. You must miss it.’

‘Lizabet and I live in Victoria Square with our child. My parents lost the business at the start of the war, so consequently needed to sell their home. They are currently staying with us until things improve.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Please give them my kind regards.’

She saw him swallow, and surmised perhaps he was wondering how the lowliest maid could be now in a position to send his illustrious parents, the ones she had slaved for, for a mere pittance before the war, ‘kind regards’. ‘Yes, yes, of course.’

As she approached the front door John ran towards her and flew into her arms, shouting, ‘Mama.’ She knelt and hugged him to her, then turned her head and saw Johan peering into the hall, observing with interest the delightful tableaux play out. She widened her eyes at him, saw him frown, realising that he could never mistake the likeness of John to his own dark looks. She ran her hand lovingly across John’s chestnut-coloured hair, then walked back to the front door and shut it. She waited by the door for a moment to hear the sound of Johan

starting the engine and drive out of Nightingale Lane, then exhaled the breath she'd held with a relief that almost melted her, saying a silent a prayer that she would never see him again.



Chapter 47

Tommy went to the hospital in Poplar where Pearl was being cared for as often as he was allowed, but would return to Nightingale Lane bowed with grief. Five days later, and Pearl was yet to wake.

‘There’s no change?’ Carrie asked him as he limped into the kitchen and sat at the huge pine table. Mrs Coyle instantly placed a mug of hot tea in front of him, then squeezed Carrie’s shoulder as she went back to her chores.

‘No change,’ he said quietly. ‘She’s not come round, Carrie. What do you think it means?’

‘That she’s mending. That she needs the time to heal.’ She pushed his hair away from his face like she would with John, knowing he needed a mother figure to make him feel better, and that Florrie was never going to do what was needed. ‘Don’t give up hope, Tommy. She might even be able to sense that you’re there, might be able to hear you. Do you talk to her?’

He nodded miserably. ‘All the time.’

‘Well...that’s good.’ Carrie felt the tears well up and she made a concerted effort not to let them fall because she knew he needed her to be strong when everything looked so bad. ‘Does her mum visit?’

‘Yeah,’ he nodded, ‘and her sisters. They’re heartbroken, so worried for her. They love her like I do.’ He looked at her. ‘Like you do.’

‘We’re *all* praying for her, then, and all those prayers will do something. She’s in the best place, they can work miracles in those hospitals, and she’s hanging on, Tommy. She hasn’t given up, has she?’

He shook his head. ‘No, no, you’re right. She hasn’t given up, and neither must I. I have to believe in her, in us. If I give up she might think she’s got nothing to stay for.’ He gave a half-smile and Carrie patted his hand.

‘Be strong for her, Tommy. Keep visiting and keep praying.’

‘I will, Carrie. I will.’

Two days later, their prayers were answered. Pearl regained consciousness, but her injuries were profound and the prognosis was still uncertain. Carrie went with Tommy to the hospital, and was shocked when she saw her friend. She had lost weight, the bones of her face and shoulders in sharp relief and her skin the colour of parchment. Her beautiful red hair was matted with blood and dirt, and Carrie wanted to weep, knowing Pearl had a steep uphill climb to

regain her health. She sat in a chair next to Pearl's bed and held her hand.

'It's me, Pearl. It's Carrie.'

Pearl half-opened her eyes and gave a small smile, then it seemed her eyelids were too heavy for her to keep them open and they sunk back again. Carrie looked up at Tommy who stood behind her and smiled encouragement, but she didn't feel it and she hoped it didn't show. What she felt was utter despair, devastated that once again they were faced with the possibility that they might lose one of their loved ones, that Pearl, her beautiful, wonderful, loyal friend, who had already faced the wilderness of grief should now be asked to fight again to save her own life. In Secunderabad, with help, she had found the strength to face William's death, to begin again, to accept she could find love again. Carrie wondered if she could do it again, to find the strength to resist everything that was trying to deplete her.

Her thoughts went to David, the man with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life. How would she face life with the loss of them both, the two people who, outside of her family, meant so very much to her, more to her than even they did apart from Tommy who along with Pear was her best friend? She held Pearl's hand even tighter, willing her to fight on no matter what her injuries would mean for her future.

'What have the doctors said,' Carrie asked Tommy without taking her eyes off Pearl, willing her to rally.

'They keep mentioning the fifty-fifty thing which tells me they're not sure. I get the feeling it's up to Pearl and her inner strength.'

Carrie nodded. 'Then she'll be alright. Pearl's a fighter. She fought before when I thought she was done for. She'll want to come back to us, to be happy with you.' Tommy put a hand on her shoulder. 'Don't doubt it, Tommy. I know how she feels about you.' She glanced up at him and smiled and his eyes suddenly brightened.

'Do you? She's said, then?'

'Oh, yes,' she nodded. 'She's said.'



PEARL RALLIED AT LAST. She woke one morning to find Tommy sitting at her bedside, his head resting on the blanket, fast asleep after a night-long vigil. She lifted her hand and stroked it gently across his hair. He woke slowly, trying to work out where he was, then looked to the top of the bed at Pearl, her green eyes brighter.

'Pearl?'

'I'm alright,' she said. 'I'm alright. I'm sore everywhere and my legs feel funny, but...my head feels clear.'

Tears coursed down his face and he stood awkwardly and tried to hold her to him without hurting her. 'I thought I'd lost you,' he whispered. 'I don't know what I would have done.'

'You haven't lost me, Tommy. I'm here. I'm still here.'



CARRIE AND MRS COYLE were in a tizzy. The front sitting room had been turned into a bedroom. On the bed was a white coverlet embroidered with primroses, and the curtains had been changed to finer ones, primrose yellow, Pearl's favourite colour, to let in the light. On every surface was a vase of flowers, and they had left a sofa and chair so that Pearl could have visitors.

'I want her to think of this room like her own little apartment,' said Carrie. 'Like the one she had in Secunderabad. Having her own space brought her luck before, so I want the same to happen here.'

Mrs Coyle stood at the door and admired their handiwork. 'She'll love it, Carrie. It's so bright and pretty. I just hope she doesn't find it too difficult having to use a wheelchair.'

Carrie sighed. 'It might not be forever. Her spine has been damaged but no one has said it's permanent. We'll just have to hope that in time she'll be able to walk again. In the meantime we'll all have to help, and I can't imagine Tommy being too far away from her. He's become very protective of her of late and he'll want to care for her.'

'It's just wonderful you're able to help her. This house has become like a sanctuary for all of us.'

'I know. Who'd have thought it, Mrs Coyle, that you and I would be back here again. And Pearl too.'

'And then we went and ran into Master Stern. It's like all the pigeons have come home to roost.'

Carrie drew in a breath. 'Yes, well, I don't think he'll want to come back here and roost. His memories of his parents' last days here can't be very happy bearing in mind they had to sell the place.'

'No, ducky, I s'pose not. And what's with this Mrs. Coyle thing? You've always called me that. You can call me Ida, y'know.'

Carrie laughed. 'You've always been Mrs Coyle to me.'

'Well, I'd like you to call me Ida. It'll make me feel like I belong here.'

Carrie turned to her, then reached for her hand. 'Oh, Mrs. Coyle...Ida, of course you belong here. What would we have done without you? You're the backbone of this house. You're 99 Nightingale Lane, like the ravens at The Tower of London. If you leave, the place will crumble.'

Ida threw her head back and laughed revealing two rows of uneven teeth. 'The ravens, indeed. Well, thank you. You saying that has made my day. I wasn't sure if you understood, Carrie. I know I work here, but...well, this is my home too, isn't it? And all of you, you, Pearl, Tommy and all the boys we have here, you're like my family. Francis says the same. We're all so close, our lives so tightly bound up.'

Carrie threw her arms around the large woman as best she could and kissed her on the cheek. 'You will always have a home here, Ida. The thought of you not being here fills me with sorrow. I can't even think of it, and I know Pearl and Tommy feel the same. I'm afraid you're a fixture here whether you like it or not.'

Ida pulled a hanky from her sleeve, dried her eyes, and blew her nose in a loud trumpet. 'Well...well, I'd better get on. That special tea we're laying on for Pearl won't make itself.'



THE MOTOR CAR TOMMY had hired pulled up outside 99 Nightingale Lane. He'd thought long and hard about it, wanting to make it a celebration but not wanting to make too much fuss. He wasn't sure what Pearl would want, but he had to get her home somehow, and there was no way she and her new mode of transport would be able to get on a tram. To his delight she was thrilled he'd been so thoughtful. Unknown to him she had feared arriving home by ambulance like an invalid. She didn't want to be thought of like that, certainly not by Tommy, and the motor struck just the right note.

Pearl had wondered how she would cope at the house now she was using a wheelchair. There had been no sign that the feeling would come back in her legs but she wasn't prepared to give up hope just yet, and neither was she about to complain. She was going home to the place she loved, with the man she loved and who loved her. It was a miracle that she had survived the blast, everyone said so, and she couldn't help believing it herself, because there were moments in hospital, in the dead of night when everything was shrouded in mist and the figures moving around her just shadows, when she thought it was the end, that she would never get to leave the hospital or discover what it would be like to live with the person she had chosen to be with for the rest of her life. They say the darkest hour is just before the dawn, and this she could attest to because she had experienced many dawns when she had not quite regained consciousness and her instinct had told her she was in trouble. The fear she had felt had been all consuming, and she could only hope and pray that her constitution was strong enough to get her through.



CARRIE, IDA COYLE, and Francis stood by the front window to await her arrival home. They watched as the car pulled up and Francis squeezed her mother's arm.

'She's here, Mum. Pearl's back,' she squealed.

Ida Coyle puffed out a breath of relief. 'Thank goodness for that,' she said. 'I wasn't prepared to believe it until I saw her outside the house. We're all back together again just as we should be. Our little family is complete.' She glanced at Carrie and felt herself go hot. 'Oh, Carrie, I'm sorry, lovey. Me and my big mouth. Our family's not quite complete is it?'

Carrie rubbed Ida's other arm and smiled. 'Don't be silly, Ida. This is a wonderful day for all of us, and hopefully we'll get another one very soon.' She tipped her chin up to her friend, her smile still in place. 'I haven't given up hope, y'know. I have to keep hoping don't I, or what's the point of loving someone. I said I'd wait for him and I will.'

'Forever?' asked Francis. Ida Coyle frowned and nudged her daughter, thinking it was rather insensitive to ask such a question.

Carrie shrugged and nodded. 'Forever.'



'THOUGHT WE'D LOST YOU,' said Carrie to Pearl as they snuggled up together on the sofa with a blanket over them in front of a crackling fire in Pearl's new bed-sitting room. And Tommy for a while there. We heard the blast you know, the awful noise it made was heard a hundred miles away. It blew down St. Barnabus's Church and the local fire-station. The fire engines came from other stations around London to put the fires out. Honestly, Pearl we thought a huge bomb had gone off.'

'Well, you knew more than me. I don't remember a thing about it.'

'What, nothing?'

Pearl thought for a moment. 'I remember saying goodbye to the girls on my shift. It was the weekend, wasn't it?' Carrie nodded. 'And I remember the dress I wore, the primrose yellow one that Tommy likes so much. We'd planned to meet at the factory gates. I think we said we'd go for a drink at the pub round the corner from the factory before coming home. I can see myself in one of the cubicles, washing off the grease and grime from the munitions, and brushing my hair after I'd taken off my work scarf, and putting on the dress...but that's it. Nothing else, at least not until I got to the hospital. I had some

strange moments there I can tell you.'

'Maybe it's just as well...that you don't remember, I mean. Sometimes it's best not to know.'

'The first clear memory I have is of Tommy, sitting by my bed with his head on the covers, snoring.' They burst out laughing, both loving that they could laugh together again.

'How romantic,' said Carrie with a chuckle.

'I s'pose it was in a way. As soon as I saw him I knew I'd be alright. There's something about him that makes me feel safe, like he has his arms around me all the time, protecting me. It's his quietness I suppose. He seems so dependable and strong.'

Carrie smiled quietly to herself, delighted that Pearl felt like this about Tommy. Only the day before Pearl was due to leave hospital Tommy had confided to Carrie, that despite his age and that Pearl was three years older, he planned to ask her to marry him.

'I'm frightened she'll meet someone else,' he'd said. 'If I leave it too long, I mean. She's a gorgeous, lovely girl. I know she has things to get over, especially with the wheelchair an' all, but it makes no difference. I know how I feel, and waiting until I'm older won't make no difference to that.'

'What about Florrie and Arthur?' she'd asked him. 'They might not approve. You know what it's like there.'

'Dad'll be alright. It's Mum who'll have something to say about it, but to be honest I don't care. You said Mum doesn't like anyone and I've been thinking about it. You're right, she doesn't. And it doesn't matter if it's Pearl I marry, or any other girl, she's never going to like it, whatever I do. She'll always find something wrong with them or something to complain about. I know she doesn't like Pearl so I might as well do what my heart tells me to do...and that's ask Pearl to marry me.'

'So...you think he's the one, then?' she asked Pearl. 'The one who can mend your heart.'

Pearl looked sad for a moment. 'You mean William.' She sighed and looked into the fire. 'William's gone, Carrie. He's never coming back, never coming home to me. If it was the other way round and I'd been taken from him I'd want him to be happy. And he knew Tommy. It's almost like it was meant to be.' She looked back at Carrie. 'Do you know what I mean?'

Carrie nodded and hugged her friend. 'Yeah, course I do. Some things are meant to be, aren't they. Someone said to me once, if something's meant for you it won't pass you by, and I think that's true. Tommy was saved from the fire at the tannery, and you were saved from the blast in Silver Town where over seventy people died and lots more injured. I think it means something.'

‘Do you?’

‘I do. And I for one hope you and he stay together and make a go of it. Honestly, Pearl, I know it would make you and Tommy happy to make it official, but I’d be just as happy as you two. My best friend and my brother in their own little family. What more could I want?’ she said, smiling.

‘David?’

Carrie’s smile dropped from her face. ‘Yeah, well, I’ve done all I can for the time being. I’d love to see him, even turned up at the Alexandria Hospital unannounced hoping he would relent and let me visit him, but the doctor said his request was unambiguous.’

‘What’s that mean?’ asked Pearl, screwing up her face.

‘It means he hadn’t changed his mind. It means he didn’t care that I was standing in the nursing home foyer feeling a right chump because he refused to see me. It means that I cried all the way home and made a right fool of meself on the tram. That’s what it means.’

‘Oh. Oh, dear.’ Pearl pulled a conciliatory face.

Carrie inhaled, then exhaled a deep sigh. ‘But I won’t give up. If he doesn’t want to see me at the moment, fine, I’ll have to accept it, but one day he might change his mind, and when he does I’ll be waiting.’



Chapter 48

May brought with it some cool weather and some deluges that Carrie prayed wouldn't spoil the big day, but on Sunday the twenty-eighth, the sun shone bright and warm as soon as daylight broke across the rooftops of London, glistening after an early shower.

Carrie ran down the stairs and knocked on Pearl's door. 'Are you decent?'

She heard Pearl puff out an answer. 'Sort of. Come in.'

Carrie opened the door to find Pearl trying to get herself into her wheelchair, her face bright red with the exertion. 'Oh, Pearl, for goodness sake, why didn't you call me?'

'I need to learn to do it by myself, Carrie. You, or Tommy for that matter won't always be around to help me all the time. I want to feel like I've got a bit of independence, that I can do at least some things for myself.'

Carrie sat on the sofa leaning towards Pearl, her hands between her knees. 'I know, sweetheart. But today of all days. Today is your day, to be pampered and preened and made even more beautiful than you are already, if that was actually possible. Ida, Francis and I want to do things for you today. Please let us. It would give us as much pleasure as you. Francis wants to do your hair. She said she can't wait to get her hands on those lovely red locks. Ida's making you a special wedding day breakfast with all your favourites, and I...I'm going to be your beauty person for today. I'm going to use some of that lovely cream we bought in India, and the cosmetics too, that Gita advised me on.' She went to the cupboard in the corner of the room. 'Oh, and this came for you yesterday.'

Pearl's eyes shone. 'Is it Dorothy's wedding dress? Say it is?'

Carrie laughed. 'Oh, Pearl, of course it is. Do you think she would have forgotten? She's even sent these,' she bent to retrieve some ivory satin pumps, 'and this,' a stunning pearl and ivory rose headdress. 'I know you were worried about finding a wedding dress during wartime, but here is one of the most beautiful I've ever seen. You'll look so pretty in it.'

'Do you think it'll fit?' Pearl asked, finger the Italian lace confection.

'We'll make sure it does, a nip in here, a little folding there, it'll look like it was made for you.'

Pearl nodded and grinned her delight. 'I don't have a veil, do I? Where will I get one from. I didn't expect Dorothy to send me hers.'

They're so personal to the bride. She offered but I said no thank you, told her to put it away for Violet, or Dotty or Seraphina for when their big days arrive.'

Carrie made for the door, her finger raised in the air. 'Ah, well, I might be able to help you there.'

Pearl smiled and frowned at the same time, wondering what Carrie was up to. When Carrie returned she had a stunning lace veil laid across her arm. 'Pearl's mouth dropped open. 'Is that for me?'

Carrie laughed again. 'Well, it's not for Tommy.'

'But how...how did you get lace like this? I know how difficult it is to get things now. Everything's running out...and lace is the last thing on anyone's list.'

'It was first on mine, Pearl, a present from Gita. I telegraphed from the Post Office and got a message to Gita at the shop. I didn't know if it would work but I thought it was worth a try. I must admit there was a moment when I thought it wouldn't arrive on time, but...here it is.'

'Carrie, it's so beautiful. Oh, I wish Gita could be here. I miss her, don't you.'

Carrie nodded. 'I do, Pearl. I miss her dreadfully, but we write to each other often. I hope to see her again one day.'

'Thank you, Carrie. You're the best friend any girl could ever have. I'm so lucky.'

'Friend? Is that all I am? In about four hours we'll be sisters.' Carrie giggled. 'Who would ever have thought it? You and me, sisters, the sister I always wanted. Just you, Pearl.'

Tears rolled down both their faces as they hugged. Pearl pushed Carrie gently away from her and she wiped her tears away on her sleeve.

'You have another sister, Carrie. And a niece. Little Rosie.'

Carrie nodded and sat in the opposite chair. 'Mm, but it sounds like Elsie's gone off the rails a bit.' She glanced at her friend. 'I know you know. You're just too kind to say anything.'

Pearl shrugged. 'I must admit I was shocked when I heard. After what Florrie's put *you* through, even though you've worked so hard and made so many people's lives better, then Elsie goes and does that. Makes you wonder why, though. Why would she choose that kind of life? She married him, didn't she, that bloke of hers?'

'Yeah, a rum old do too by the sounds of it. Not that mine was any better. Definitely not the beautiful wedding I'd dreamed about, that's for sure. Apparently, both she and Len got blind drunk after the wedding, and he got thrown out of the pub 'cause he got himself into a fight. Ida told me, took me aside one day and asked me if I knew. Well 'course I didn't. Didn't even get an invite, did I...or my John. That would have been Florrie's doing, she wouldn't have wanted me

there and Elsie wasn't about to fight my corner, she can't stand the sight of me. Anyway, I was in Secunderabad. Didn't make no difference really, I couldn't have gone, but it would have been nice to have been asked though, or even told they were getting married at the church.'

Pearl frowned. 'But I thought they were already married. Why did they get married again?'

'They had a gypsy wedding the first time. Len's Romany. It was alright to be honest, not the way we do things but it takes all sorts to make a world. They considered themselves married, although Florrie wasn't thrilled. Well, nothing thrills *her*. You'd have to go a long way to get her thrilled about anything. I've no doubt it was her that insisted they had a church wedding when Rose was born, poor little mite. I do think about her.'

'Did Tommy go? To the second one, I mean.'

'Yeah. He didn't want to admit it because he was worried he'd hurt my feelings, but I told him it didn't make no never-mind to me. Even if I'd been in Whitechapel I doubt I'd have been invited anyway.'

It went quiet, both girls deep in thought.

'So why's she on the game?' Pearl piped up.

Carrie shrugged. 'God knows.'

'We'd always heard Len West had his fingers in lots of pies, was making money hand over fist even now when there's a war on.'

'That's what he told everyone, including Elsie, and of course Florrie wanted to believe it. She thought she'd do alright out of it but then she's always judged people by what they've got in their pockets.'

'But not pimping, surely?'

'If Elsie's on the game, and from what I hear she definitely is, then let's hope she got shot of him and she's doing it for her and the kiddie and not paying for his other interests if you get my meaning. I'm not going to judge her. Sometimes women have to do things to make ends meet. It's not ideal I know, but I also know what it's like to be judged by everyone and half the time they get it completely wrong. She's still my sister, and yours soon.' She glanced sadly at Pearl. 'If she ever needed me, well, yes, I'd help her, 'course I would.'

'But she's never helped you. She wasn't much of a sister when you were pushed onto old Bateman and sent off to India. She should have said something to Florrie, been in your corner, said it wasn't right. I would have.'

Carrie smiled benignly at Pearl, her eyes full of affection. 'I know you would, and that's the difference between you and Elsie. Elsie's always been out for herself. Len was probably a match made in heaven for her because he's exactly the same. There's a story there somewhere. I just don't know what it is. All I care about is poor little

Rose. I want to ask Florrie about her but I haven't been back to Hanbury Street since Tommy and I left the day he came back here. She'd probably welcome him with open arms, but she won't want to see me, that's for sure.'

'Would you like me to ask Tommy to find out about Rose?'

'Yes, thanks, Pearl. That would help. I've never set eyes on her. She's a few months older than John. Bet she's a pretty little thing. Elsie was always the popular one. S'pose it was the blonde hair and blue eyes that did it.' She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'Oh, my God, look at the time. We're sitting here gossiping and you're going to be late for your own wedding.'

'I thought I was supposed to be.'

'Yeah, but not by that much.'



A SHAFT OF SUNLIGHT hit the church as Pearl, Carrie, John, Ida Coyle and Francis arrived. Pearl was radiant, her red hair shining in the May sunshine. Dorothy's dress had been a little large for her, but with some nifty needlework, Mrs Coyle and Francis had altered it so that it fitted her slim figure.

'I s'pose that's one advantage of being in a wheelchair,' smiled Pearl. 'No one will know this dress was a bit big for me. It looks wonderful. Thank you both.'

As Tommy and Pearl said their vows tears rolled down Carrie and Ida Coyle's cheeks. 'All I've done is cry today,' said Carrie, 'but I'm as happy as Larry.'

They'd glanced across the aisle at Pearl's family, her mother and sisters who were also in tears, and when they'd caught their glances they'd all ended up laughing. 'What a lot we are,' said Pearl's mum, quietly. 'But this is the happiest day for me. Tommy's a wonderful chap, Carrie. And he dotes on our Pearl. I couldn't have wished for a finer son-in-law.'

Carrie had smiled her thanks, then looked around the church for her own family, wondering if Florrie, Arthur, Alfie and Elsie would turn up. She squinted her eyes into the gloom at the back of the church. Arthur was sitting on the very last pew on their side. Carrie excused herself, and passing John over to Ida's lap, made her way down the side of the pews and sat next to him. As she slid closer to him he put his head down.

'You came then? It's nice to see you at your son's wedding. I'm just wondering why his mother didn't turn up. I understand Tommy went to Hanbury Street to tell you all he was getting married.'

Arthur nodded. 'He did.'

‘Where is she then? And Alfie and Elsie?’

‘We don’t have a lot of truck with Elsie these days, well, she don’t have much truck with us. Too ashamed I expect. And Florrie wouldn’t let Alfie come.’

‘I’m surprised you’re here then. Does she know?’

‘She knows.’

‘You’ll be under house-arrest from now on, Dad. Is defying her a new thing or has it been going on some time.’ Carrie glanced to the front of the church where Tommy was wheeling Pearl into the vestry to sign the register.

Arthur sighed. ‘Look, Carrie. I know you’ve got grievances, but there’s no point in taking it out on me. Your mother’s not a bad person, but she has fixed ideas, and you know as well as I do when she’s got her dander up there’s no pushing it down again.’

‘Fixed ideas?’ Carrie narrowed her eyes, astonished that Arthur would attempt to defend Florrie. ‘Is that what you call it? Sending her daughter to country she’d hardly heard of with a man she didn’t even know because she had a fixed idea? And what about today? What fixed idea has she got about Tommy’s wedding, her eldest son whose big day she couldn’t even be bothered to turn up to. Why would she hurt him so much, Dad? What’s he done?’

Arthur turned to face her, his eyes as bright as shards of glass. ‘He’s living with you and he’s marrying Pearl. It’s enough for her.’

‘Well, she’s a very selfish and heartless woman and I for one will never forgive her. D’you know, I could have let what happened to me go. I’m tougher than that, I’ve bloody-well had to be, but to take it out on a gentle soul like Tommy. It’s disgraceful, Dad, and you know it.’ Arthur said nothing. ‘And what about Elsie?’ Arthur didn’t reply. ‘Dad?’

‘She’s dragged our family down. Admittedly we didn’t have far to go but we did the best we could, our Carrie. That Len West, the one your mother was so keen on, is a bad’un. I told her he was trouble but Florrie wouldn’t listen. He left our Elsie high and dry with little Rose to look after. We didn’t have a ha’penny to bless ourselves with so we couldn’t give her anything to help out.’

‘And what happened to the money Arnold Bateman gave Florrie?’

Arthur stared at her again and Carrie thought he would berate her for not using Mum instead of Florrie, but he seemed to think better of it. ‘To your sister...and ‘im, on some scheme or other he had goin’. Lost the lot didn’t she?’

Anger infused Carrie like a hot poker in her veins. If she hadn’t been sitting in a house of God she would have exploded. ‘And that’s why I was sent away to India with Bateman was it? So she could invest in some tinpot scheme that fell flat on its face, that’s if it even

existed?' Arthur reverted to silence again.

'Well, I'm glad,' hissed Carrie. 'I'm glad she lost it because it's what she deserved. And you, Dad. It's about time you became the man of the 'ouse because frankly, it's obvious who's wearing the trousers.'

Arthur looked glum. 'I can't 'elp 'ow she is.'

'No, but you can help how you are. She should be here, and you should have made sure *she* was. I feel so ashamed that Tommy's own mother couldn't be here for his wedding, although why I should worry I don't know. She's the one who should be ashamed, not me.'

'I'll tell 'er.'

'But will you though? Will you tell 'er, because maybe you've left it too late to do anything about her. She's a harridan. I'm sorry to speak so plainly but there it is, I speak as I find. And she's made all our lives a flippin' misery. Get Alfie away from her Dad because she'll try and ruin his life too. Bring him to me, I'll take care of him, but please don't leave him in her hands. He's only fifteen. There's still time for him. Please, Dad.'

Arthur closed his eyes momentarily. He knew he had been too soft over the years, acknowledged he should have been stronger with Florrie, but she was a spitfire when she got going. He nodded, then left the pew, and Carrie watched as he went through the big wooden double doors at the front of the church, allowing them to close with a clang. Everyone turned round at the noise the doors made which echoed under the vaulted ceiling, but there was nothing to see. Arthur had gone.

The wedding breakfast was held at Nightingale Lane. Ida, Francis, and a few helpers Ida had known from the old days had been busy in the kitchen from early light, with Ida taking a couple of hours away to see Pearl and Tommy make their vows.

She had done them proud, with salads, a ham, salmon in aspic, bread straight from the oven, and a wonderful two-tier wedding cake Ida had insisted on making herself. There was a champagne toast provided by Dorothy and Marcus and sweet desserts for John, Lottie and Seraphina. The wedding day was a complete success, and Carrie was delighted she had witnessed her brother marrying her best friend. She and Pearl were sisters. To Carrie it was the best thing to have happened in a long time, and she couldn't help thinking that God moved in mysterious ways and that someone was looking down on them kindly from on high.

Pearl wheeled her chair over to Carrie and reached for her hand.

'Thank you, Carrie, for this amazing day. I've been watching you. You've had a smile on your face all day and it's so lovely to see.'

'I'm so happy for you and Tommy, Pearl. I know it's your day but we've all needed this...something wonderful to take our mind off the

war and those poor young men overseas.'

Pearl nodded. 'I know. I wondered if it was the right time to be getting married, what with everything going on, that maybe I was being selfish because I wanted to become a wife when there were more important things going on in the world, terrible things.'

Carrie smiled gently. 'We're all selfish then. We've had some very rocky times, haven't we? We all deserved this lovely day, you and Tommy most of all. I can't believe how well it's gone.'

Pearl looked across at Tommy with pride. He was sipping champagne and chatting with Dorothy and Marcus, throwing his head back and laughing at something Dorothy said. 'I'm so proud of him. Look how handsome he is in his suit. I'm so used to him in his work clothes. I think I'll make him wear it for work.'

'Have you thought about that...now that the factory is gone?'

'Not yet. We've got a bit saved up so we've got a few weeks before we get desperate. In the meantime Tommy can look for something else.' She squeezed Carrie's hand. 'And we'll look for somewhere else to live, Carrie. We can't expect you to house us now we're married.'

Carrie widened her eyes and chuckled. 'You will not.'

Pearl stared at her. 'What?'

'You're going to stay here. I insist. Tommy can move his stuff into your bed-sitting room. You can decorate it how you wish, do what you please with it, turn it into a little place of sanctuary for you and him. No one will bother you there.'

'But, Carrie...'

'No buts. And hang onto those savings. If you want to save up for a place after the war that's up to you, you might have a little family by then, but right now you can stay here. Tommy can have his old job back here and look for another in the meantime.'

'But don't you want your room back? We don't want to put on you, Carrie.'

'You could never put on me. Why are you saying that? I couldn't bear it if you left. We're a family. Of course, when you're ready to leave, yes, it's your decision, but we're in the middle of a war, Tommy and you have lost your jobs through no fault of your own. I won't have you roughing it. Stay here, please, or I'll be worried sick. Stay here for me.'

'Thank you, Carrie. I'll tell Tommy. He'll be over the moon.'

She turned her chair and wheeled towards Tommy who bent down on his haunches to listen to Pearl as she told him her news. Carrie watched as Tommy looked up at her with sparkling eyes, then straightened up and went across to Carrie, kissing her on the cheek.

'Thanks, sis.'

'No need to thank me, Tommy. You'll be helping me out, too. I

need you both here.' He winked at her and went back to his new wife, lifting her hand and kissing it. Carrie thought how romantic he was and felt a surge of pride that he was her brother, handsome even with his injuries, and now a married man. She wondered how long it would be before he started his own family. Then she thought about Florrie and the surge of pride dissolved into a surge of anger. She shook her head wondering how bitter someone would need to be to do what Florrie had done today. She was the groom's mother. There was Pearl's mum sitting in the corner with her daughters, all getting tiddly on champagne, the bride's mother in the place she should be on her daughter's wedding day, but no one except Carrie and John were here for Tommy, and she hadn't yet told him that Arthur had turned up at the church. She was in two minds whether she should, wondering if it would hurt him all the more.

Her mind then began to wander to another wedding that took place at 99 Nightingale Lane, only three short years before. Johan Stern, the son of the family she worked for as a maid and John's father, to Lizabet, an heiress to a publishing fortune. Carrie had always thought she and Johan would be together, that when John came along they would be a family, but of course Johan's family had other ideas. He had married Lizabet, an American whose family had business connections to the Sterns without telling Carrie he was getting married. He had used her then cast her aside without knowing he was to be a father, and still didn't know unless he had realised John was his when he had seen him with Carrie in the hall after visiting Pearl.

John was made in his image, the dark curly hair, the olive blushed skin, the long sensitive fingers. If Johan hadn't worked it out then he would be a simpleton and she knew he wasn't that, but she was also aware that sometimes men with children they didn't want to own up to shirked their responsibilities, and she was almost certain Johan would not want to tell Lizabet he had fathered a child born out of wedlock. If Carrie pursued him it would bring great shame, not just to him, but his wife and children. In the society in which they lived it would never be forgotten. They would all be tainted by it and she was sure Johan would never risk it. The common practice was to have an arrangement with the mother who would be viewed as a harlot and the one at fault if it was ever discovered, which would be kept secret, sometimes an open secret, but a secret nonetheless; a subject never mentioned in polite circles except with a nod and a wink.

'Penny for them, darling.' Dorothy sat next to her, a glass of champagne in one hand, a twin snuggled into the crook of her other arm. 'You were miles away. Where did you go?'

Carrie smiled, a little shaken by her own thoughts. 'I was just

thinking about the last wedding I attended here. I say attend when I mean served at. I was one of the waitresses, with a uniform that was getting tighter by the day.'

'Oh, you mean...'

'Don't say it.' Carrie interrupted her. 'That ghost was put to rest long ago,'

'Are you sure?'

Carrie glanced at her. 'I don't have any feelings for him if that's what you're wondering. Maybe some sadness at my own naivete. I thought he loved me, that the times we spent together meant love, but clearly not. Well, not for him anyway.'

'I hate to say it, Carrie, but it happens quite often. We know a number of men, young and old, who have secret children. The women are sometimes kept in apartments with their own income, provided by the men, of course, to ensure they don't spill the beans as it were. Some of the women set out to catch a man with a title and a fortune, often those who have no other means to earn. They are perfectly aware what some men are like; that when something's offered to them they find it impossible to turn it down.'

'Like the Fishing Fleet who go to India.'

Dorothy pulled a face. 'D'you know you're right. But being part of the Fishing Fleet seems to give it respectability.' She shook her head. 'I suppose it's the same thing, apart from the fact that the girls who go over to India to catch a man come from middle, and upper-class families who hope their daughters will marry officers, preferably from the same or higher social class.'

Carrie sighed. 'What a load of tosh. Prostitutes in everything but name.'

'Yes, I suppose it could be looked at like that. But they don't always get gold at the end of the rainbow. Some of them are very unhappy. They hate India, the heat, the strange food, the culture, but have to stay because of their husbands, and then their children are sent back to England when they're seven to go to boarding school.'

'Arnold's plans were definitely going in that direction for John. Over my dead body.'

'Yes, I meant to ask you about that. Any news there?'

Carrie shook her head, and without realising it her shoulders drooped. Her heart began to beat faster, so she took a breath to quell the anxiety the mention of Arnold's name caused her. 'Nothing so far. I'm guessing he's gone home to Dolores, his mother, although I pity her. She's a nice woman but scared of him. He treats her like dirt.'

'What a shame.'

'Yeah, well, she should kick him out, but I hope she doesn't. He might think he's entitled to come to me.'

‘He isn’t. You’ve discovered that, not without good reason. And now you’ve filed those papers with the solicitor. It should keep you safe. Perhaps you could divorce him somewhere down the line.’

‘Divorce, Dorothy? Unheard of, a woman divorcing her husband? How far will I get?’

Don’t know, darling. Have you thought of an annulment? Perhaps we should look into it, although he must agree.’ She shrugged. ‘You know it’s something my fellow suffragettes and I are working on. Everything is so unbalanced...all in favour of the male of the species of course.’

‘It might not happen soon enough for me.’

Dorothy thought. ‘Perhaps you need some muscle. Do you remember those Belgian refugees I was telling you about? We’ve got some more families coming over next week. Could you be ready to take a family or two by then, to fill your rooms. At least then if Bateman pushes his way in, there won’t be anywhere for him to stay.’

‘Except in my room.’

Dorothy’s lips twitched. ‘Can’t imagine him wanting that, darling.’

They glanced at each other and burst out laughing. Everyone in the wedding party turned and looked at them with smiles on their faces.

‘What’s so funny, sis?’ asked Tommy, his mouth stretched into a wide grin, happy to see Carrie laughing again.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ she cried, still laughing. ‘A conversation for another time.’



THE CONVERSATION CAME around far too quickly for Carrie. Within two weeks of the wedding she got word from Tommy that Arnold Bateman had been seen in Whitechapel.

‘He was in civvies, Carrie. I heard it from the boys at the pub. Apparently he was in there telling them all about his exploits in India, how he’d been promoted, and that he would be living somewhere better than his usual billet.’ said Tommy, breathless from his walk back to Nightingale Lane. ‘Do you think he means here? I’m sorry to bring you bad news but I thought you’d want to know, to be prepared just in case.’

Carrie sunk into a kitchen chair and rested her chin in her hands. ‘There is no “just in case”,’ she said gloomily. ‘He’s bound to come here, isn’t he? I’m his wife.’

‘You got those papers though. The ones with the solicitor.’

‘Which will mean nothing when he’s pounding on the front door demanding to be let in.’

Tommy slid into a chair next to her. ‘So, don’t let him in.’

She turned and looked at him, her expression unreadable. ‘Do you know the only place I can get a divorce is the High Court in an open courtroom, meaning everyone gets to know your business, and even then I have to prove he committed a rape or incest because they won’t consider any other reason. There is no other way. And it costs a fortune, and as I’m the one bringing the case to court it will probably fail because I’m not a man.’

‘What if he brings it to court, a divorce I mean.’

She turned away, a sick feeling in her stomach. ‘He won’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Why would he? He could say he owns everything, that it was because of me being with him that I was able to buy 99 Nightingale Lane. I’ll probably have to give him everything to get rid of him. It’s so unfair.’

Tommy whistled through his teeth. ‘I didn’t realise. When you put it like that...it’s wrong, isn’t it?’

‘Course it is, Tommy. And what about voting in elections. Why is it only men who get the chance to vote? Women have kept this country running since August 1914 because of men going to war. They’re working on the buses and trams selling tickets, in the hospitals saving lives, in the fields growing food for the population, fighting fires, in the shops and offices, and as you well know, making ammunition to keep our boys well-stocked. And we’re still giving birth, looking after the babies and running the home. All that and only a few lucky women, those over thirty and who own a property are allowed to vote, and that’s only because of the suffrage movement and their supporters in parliament.’

‘Not you then?’

‘No, not me. Not for years. I’m twenty-three, and even though I’ve worked my arse off and own a property I’m not allowed a say in how the country’s run.’

‘Things might change.’

‘Yeah. They might.’

They both went quiet.

‘So...what will you do about you know who?’

She rested her chin on her hand again and sighed. ‘I’m thinking about it.’



CHAPTER 49

‘I ‘ope they like mutton stew,’ said Ida as she ladled the steaming stew into bowls. ‘Not sure what they eat over there.’

‘I’m sure they’ll love whatever you cook, Ida. Who wouldn’t, and that stew smells delicious. It’s making my mouth water.’

‘I thought the government were trying to get them ‘ome, that’s what it says in the papers, that they want them repatriated into their home country before too long.’

Carrie nodded. ‘That’s true, Ida, but the families we have are Jews and they can’t go home yet. I think it’s important we help out, ‘specially when they’ve got kiddies. I can’t see *them* be in need. If I thought they would be sent back to danger I would never forgive myself.’

‘No, I’m sure you’re right. It’s terrible what them German soldiers did over there,’ she lowered her voice to a whisper, ‘specially to the women. Absolutely awful by all accounts.’

‘They won’t be here for ever, just until it’s safe for them to take their families back to their homeland. I’m sure they’d rather be there than here anyway. You know what they say, there’s no place like home, although I’m not sure they would agree with that at the moment from what I’ve heard.’

A noise in the doorway made them both look up. A little girl was standing in the entrance to the kitchen. She wore a brown woollen dress and a once white smock that had seen better days, covered in the grime of her travels from Belgium to England. A faded scarf covered her hair which was blonde but looked brown because of the dirt caught up in it. Her cheeks were sunken and under her eyes were purple smudges of tiredness. She looked like she hadn’t washed for weeks. Carrie turned and smiled, wanting to put the child at ease.

‘Hello. Is there something you wanted?’ The girl made a mime of eating and chewing.

‘They’re hungry, Carrie,’ said Ida, pouring the last of the stew into a jug. ‘There, that’ll do for Tommy when he gets back for his tea. Any luck with the job hunting so far?’

Carrie sadly shook her head. ‘Not yet, Ida. He’s worn out his weight in shoe leather going from place to place but there’s nothing doing. He says he feels bad, like he’s letting Pearl down.’

‘That’s silly that is. Not his fault he lost his job in an explosion. He wasn’t the only one, everyone who worked there did...and more besides, some of them.’ she said wistfully. ‘Anyway, you get them Belgians into the dining room and I’ll dish up. Just hope they eat it. I can’t bear waste.’

Seven empty bowls wiped clean with hunks of bread from a basket in the middle of the table were testament that the families ate the mutton stew with relish and were completely satisfied. The men, women and two children leant back in their chairs, sighing with comfort at the first decent meal they’d eaten in days.

As Carrie cleared the table one of the men stood and made a shallow bow to her. He looked about mid-twenties and had blond hair

that reached the frayed collar of his shirt. His eyes were grey, an unusual colour, that gave him an almost other-worldly appearance. He clutched an old cap that he turned around and around in his rough working hands, the fingernails split, and blackened with ground-in dirt.

‘Thank you, for the food...and help you give us. My name is Joshka, and here are my parents, my mother, Alitza, and my father, Gabor.’ He indicated two older people sitting next to one another, faces pale with exhaustion, their skin indicative of the outdoor life they led. Their clothes, all brown wool, with a greying cotton apron, and a shirt, almost threadbare. They didn’t make eye-contact with Carrie, but sat with their hands clasped together in their laps, their eyes half-closed as though they waited for something to happen. Their demeanour was one of quiet acceptance, of giving up the fight, and Carrie’s heart went out to them. Alitza wore a loose scarf over her hair, a piece of gauzy fabric that had once been bright with red and yellow flowers but was now dulled with dust, which did not successfully contain the grey wisps that had escaped and were hanging untidily around her face, and Gabor, a cap, which he had not removed as he ate, pulled down low over his eyes so he did not have to meet the eyes of the others sitting around the table.

Carrie made a single nod to Joshka, holding the empty breadbasket in front of her, almost to shield herself against these strangers who had come into her home and were now living among them.

‘I’m Carrie,’ she said, ‘and this is Ida, our cook. She cooked the food for you today, and makes all the food we give to our wounded soldiers who come here to rest after being at the front.’

‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘Very good. Very warm now.’ He turned to Alitza again, then back to Carrie. ‘My mother likes to cook, yes, very good cook. She will help in kitchen, make food for soldiers.’

Carrie glanced at Ida, thinking that it was unlikely Ida would allow anyone in her kitchen, which she guarded jealously as her own domain. ‘Er, yes, help is always appreciated, isn’t it, Ida?’

Ida gave a smile that didn’t reach her eyes as she leant towards the table to clear the bowls. ‘Oh, yes, help is always appreciated.’



CARRIE SAT ALONE IN her sitting room, mulling over her decision to help the Belgian families to whom she had offered aid. In her heart she knew it hadn’t been a completely altruistic decision. Every room in the house was now taken, even the attics had been scrubbed, repainted by Tommy, and filled with beds and furniture for families from Belgium looking for refuge. Filling the house with people was

her way of defending herself against Arnold Bateman whom she knew would eventually make his presence known to her. She had been awaiting his arrival since Dorothy had told her he had been posted back to England, anticipating the knock on the door, the drunken confrontation that she had been faced with time and time again in Secunderabad. It was not an if, but a when. Her plan wasn't perfect, this she knew. If he evoked the law of wife being subservient to husband and owning everything in the marriage she doubted there would be anything she could do to stop him, but because she possessed information with regard to his proclivities he would take a huge risk if he decided to challenge her.

She had discovered him in their marital bed with one of his lovers. She had written down the date and the name of the young soldier Arnold had charmed and persuaded into a liaison. She also had witnesses, the not inconsequential Marcus and Dorothy Tremaine who had promised to speak for her should the necessity arise. She felt her case was a strong one, but still the sickening heat of anxiety coursed through her. She knew it was fear, and it grieved her that she was still frightened of Arnold, even though he had not been part of her life for over a year. The power he had over her was thanks to her mother, and even if Carrie could ever find it in her heart to forgive Florrie for handing her over to Arnold in a business transaction, it was the control over her life and that of John's, a little boy Arnold couldn't even bear to acknowledge, that she would never be able to forgive.

Florrie had written Carrie's future and that of her grandson without even a glance to the years ahead. She had sold it for a sum of money she had squandered on a tricky man who had promised her a fast shilling and she had fallen for it. That Carrie had survived her time in Secunderabad and thrived with the aid of those friends who cared about her welfare as a cuckolded woman had been pure chance, and nothing whatsoever to do with the man she had been unfortunate in marrying and who couldn't have cared any less about her if he'd tried.

Carrie knew that the outcome of what happened next would depend very much on keeping her nerve and not letting Arnold intimidate her. She also knew who she could depend on to support her when circumstances became difficult, which they certainly would, and who would be in her corner as they always had been, those who were utterly loyal, who knew that a great wrong had been served on her, and who could be counted on. And it definitely did not include Florrie Dobbs.



‘I GOT A JOB!’ TOMMY burst into the kitchen, his mouth pulled into a wide grin. ‘I got a flippin’ job.’

Pearl turned her wheelchair away from the table in the kitchen from where she was peeling potatoes and held her arms out to him. ‘Oh, Tommy, well done. After all this time. What will you be doing?’

He knelt down and took her in his arms, kissing her forehead, then brandishing a bunch of flowers he’d had hidden behind his back. He presented them to her with an excited flourish. ‘Rebuilding Silver Town. There’s to be a massive rebuilding of about four hundred houses. Also they’re going to repair others that were damaged but can be saved. They want roofers and people to put in windows. I’m going in on the painting and decorating side. I’m a dab hand with a paintbrush, even with my limp. I can still get up a ladder...and stay on it.’

Ida clapped her hands with glee which sent clouds of flour billowing into the kitchen, making Carrie, Tommy and Pearl laugh out loud. ‘Well, there you are. Something good has come out of all that devastation.’

Tommy nodded. ‘Yeah, and the pay’s not bad either. Means we can afford...you know what.’ He stood and looked at Pearl, his eyes misty with love. Pearl put her head down, her face the colour of her red dress.

Carrie frowned and inclined her head to one side. ‘What’s a “you know what”?’

‘Oh, Tommy,’ chastised Pearl. ‘We weren’t going to say anything. Not yet.’

‘Say anything about what?’ cried Carrie. ‘For goodness sake, don’t keep us guessing. What’s going on?’

Tommy said nothing and Pearl looked up at them, smiling. ‘I’m expecting.’

Ida and Carrie cried out with happiness. ‘Oh, Pearl, Tommy, how wonderful,’ said Carrie. ‘This is such a good day...Tommy’s found a good job and now we’re going to have another little one about the place. I’m so excited.’

Ida began kneading her bread again with gusto. ‘I knew our luck would change. This is the best news we could have hoped for. Another babby for us all to love. When, Pearl? When will it be here?’

Pearl laughed, delighted she was surrounded by so much love. ‘I think the middle of February. I’m about two and a half months so we’ve ages yet. I wasn’t sure if we should tell anyone, just in case. Sometimes things happen, don’t they, y’know. Sometimes...well...because of my injuries, I thought maybe...’

Carrie engulfed her in a hug. ‘Please don’t think like that, Pearl. You’re pregnant, and you said you thought it might not happen and it

has. Let's be positive and look forward to next year when you'll be welcoming a new little one. It'll be lovely.' Pearl beamed with pleasure and Tommy stood by her as proud as punch.

There was a rapping on the front door and Ida sighed at the interruption.

'That'll be the next lads who are due, I expect. We're expecting two new ones today, only young they are too, bless their hearts.' She smiled widely at Pearl, Tommy, and Carrie. 'You stay here and enjoy your moment. I'll go.' She called up the stairs. 'Francis, the boys are here, my love. Need you down here.'

Francis bounded down the stairs, duster and wax polish in hand. 'Here, Mum. All present and correct.'

Ida went to the front door and opened it, her welcoming smile dropping off her face like a stone.

'Yes?' She waved Francis away who frowned and tutted her annoyance. 'Can I be of help?'

'I'd like to see Mrs Bateman.'

'And who shall I say is calling?'

'Arnold Bateman, her husband.'

'Arnold,' said Carrie flatly as she opened the door again. Ida had shut it in Arnold's face in disgust before telling Carrie she had a visitor.

Arnold stood on the front step, his hands in the pockets of his suit trousers, his jacket buttoned and his shirt crisply starched. He wore a brown Fedora that matched the colour of his suit perfectly. 'Done all right here, haven't you?'

'What do you want, Arnold?'

He pursed his lips. 'Only what's mine.'

'And that is?' Carrie sensed Tommy coming to stand behind her rather than see him. He placed a hand on the small of her back as if to say, 'I'm here. You're not alone.'

'You, for a start. You're still my wife.'

'I think you'll find we're estranged, Arnold. We haven't lived together for over a year.'

'I'd like to put that right.'

'It's already right, and you're not welcome here.'

'I think the law says I am.'

'I think the law says you've broken it and I have witnesses as well as me to support that.'

Carrie saw him falter. 'That was then.'

'Yes, it was then, in the first year of our marriage when you should have been making an effort to make the marriage work. The marriage wasn't consummated. No woman worth her salt would put up with it.'

'No man would put up with your adultery.'

Carrie's eyes widened, but it was no less than she had been expecting. 'There was no adultery as well you know. And I think you're going to have a hell of a job convincing anyone of it.'

'Lives here though, doesn't he?'

At that moment, a flash of something went through Carrie. She wasn't sure if it was power or triumph or just pure and utter intense dislike. For the first time since David's problems came to light and his admittance to the Alexandria Hospital, she was glad he wasn't living at Nightingale Lane. 'No, he doesn't.'

'That's not what I was told.'

'By whom?'

'Your own mother. She told my mum, Dolores months ago.'

Carrie laughed. 'My mother doesn't know anything about me. David Lawrence does not live here. She got it wrong. She always gets it wrong. Now, I'm busy, and I'll thank you to get off my step and stay off.' She slammed the door, then ran to the window in her sitting room and watched him saunter down the street, hands still in his pockets, his Fedora cockily pushed further back on his head.

Tommy followed her into the sitting room. 'What now?'

Carrie shook her head, still watching Arnold until he got to the end of the street and turned the corner. 'I don't know, Tommy. If we get lucky that will be the end of it and we'll never see him again, but if I know anything about Arnold Bateman he won't give up until he gets what he wants, and if I'm not mistaken, what he wants is 99 Nightingale Lane, our home.'



'HOW ARE THE REFUGEES, Carrie? Have they settled in?'

Carrie sipped from her china cup and nodded. 'I think so, Dorothy. It's hard to tell to be honest, their expressions don't change much. They eat everything Ida puts in front of them without question, keep their rooms clean, and have offered to help with the cooking, although Ida has managed to sidestep it 'til now. She guards that kitchen like a sentry. I just can't see her allowing anyone to use her stove or her pots and pans. She says a woman's stove is like the things she keeps on her dressing table, personal, something to be cherished, not something you can just pass to someone else to use. It's quite funny really.'

'Have the soldiers you're looking after met them yet? I wondered how it would work out.'

'The soldiers and the male refugees mix in the common room. You know what men are like when they're discussing what they've done in the war. And I think it might have helped some of those who found being on the front hard to bear, brought them out of themselves when

they realised that there are others in Europe who have experienced terrible hardships as well.'

'Some of the Belgians have had a dreadful time. It's the children I worry for.'

'Oh, yes. My heart goes out to them, but the two little girls with us look more relaxed than they did when they arrived, easier within themselves. I just hope when they return to their home they can be happy again.'

Dorothy nodded and crossed her legs, arranging her skirts around her.

'Something on your mind, Dorothy?'

'I heard...you had a visit.'

Carrie sighed, put her cup on the table and nervously entwined her fingers in her lap. 'What can I do, Dorothy?'

'What does the solicitor say?'

'That if he decides to pursue it there's nothing I can do.'

Dorothy drew in a breath, then settled back into the settee in her drawing room. The twins were in the nursery with Nanny Field, fed, changed and sleeping soundly. On the table in front of her and Carrie was an occasional table on which were little cups of chai and some honey and almond cakes, untouched, to remind them of their time together in Secunderabad. Carrie had loved the sentiment, but nothing could detract from the anxiety Arnold had brought to her door.

'I always think about what Marcus would do in situations such as this.'

'And what would that be?'

Dorothy laughed. 'Maybe not what's needed here, but I'm sure he would handle it in the way he handles everything. He's so measured, so...reasonable for want of a better word. He would take Bateman aside and talk to him, man to man. I can just imagine it. She put on a voice. 'Now look here, old man, let's discuss this like gentlemen...etc. etc. I'm not sure it would cut much ice with whom you're dealing with. He is a tricky prospect I think.'

Carrie pulled a face. 'If only David was...'

'Have you not considered that perhaps it is as well David is not on the scene at present. If he were living at Nightingale Lane with you, you would have to disclose it to Bateman and would that not make life much more difficult for you?'

Carrie nodded. 'For the first time I was almost glad David was out of the picture. I could at least tell Arnold truthfully that David wasn't living with me. He was surprised because he had banked on having something over me. It sounds like Florrie told Arnold's mother, Dolores that David and I were living in sin together.'

'In sin? Honestly! It's so old-fashioned, don't you think? I can't

wait for the war to end so I can get back to the suffrage movement and change things for women. Men can do just as they please, but we have to abide by the laws and rules they make for us. It needs to change. It must change if we're to ever move forward.'

Carrie walked from palatial Victoria Square where Dorothy lived, back to Nightingale Lane. She took her time, looking in the shop windows and pretending she was out on a shopping trip, anything to get her mind off the one thing that wouldn't leave her alone. Yet again, Arnold Bateman was turning her life upside down, infecting it with his poison and threatening the happiness she had found. Yes, she had information about him that would jeopardise not only his reputation but his position in the army of which he was so proud, but would she be believed, even with Dorothy and Marcus' sanctions of her experiences in her marriage, which would surely be believed even more readily than her own testimony. There were people he would depend upon to uphold his own story, Florrie for one, who would be under pressure to say he was happy to make a marriage with Carrie, and Dolores, who was terrified of him. Then there were his superiors in the army who would not want to be seen sanctioning Arnold's lifestyle. He had supporters and it felt to her rather like stalemate, or would have been if she were a man. Being a woman meant everything was weighted in his favour. She had a fight on her hands, of this she was sure.

She continued to wander through the streets until she came to a tiny teashop. Someone had painted the outside in the red, white, and blue of the Union flag, making it look somewhat incongruous against the more austere buildings either side of it. Inside were quaint tables set with crisp white tablecloths on which were little vases of antirrhinums and lily of the valley. Carrie sighed and decided to treat herself to some tea and some fingers of buttered toast. She had been unable to eat anything at Dorothy's because of the anxious sick feeling in her stomach, but her walk had made her hungry.

She sat at one of the tables in the window and gave the waitress her order. As she waited she watched people as they walked past; uniformed nannies pushing prams, mothers holding the hands of children as they bowled hoops along the paths with sticks, and elderly couples, their lives so changed once again by war when perhaps those who went to the Boer War thought they would never see conflict again in their lifetime. She knew this was a different scene to the one playing out in the streets near Hanbury Street where Florrie and Arthur lived, where children ran the streets, some without shoes and pushing homemade pushchairs with the latest edition to the family inside, their noses running with snot, their bellies crying out for a decent meal. Woman made meals from nothing, the men, either their

husbands or their sons, or sometimes both, would have gone to war in Europe, some never to return, some to return but not as they were when they left. She wanted to do something to change their fates, to ensure they had lives well lived. It was why she'd opened 99 Nightingale Lane as a convalescent home for wounded soldiers. She'd wanted to do her bit, something positive for the community, and she hoped that by looking after the young men who came to her for care, she also gave something back to the women who waited for them, the families with children that had been divided by the conflict hundreds of miles away from the fighting.

'You look sad, Carrie. I'm sorry to see you looking so melancholy.'

She looked up, shaken by the interruption of her thoughts by the smooth tones of a velvety voice, to see Johan standing by her table.

'Johan!'

He indicated another chair at the table. 'May I?' She hesitated and he held up his hand. 'If it's not convenient, of course I will sit at another table. I don't wish to interrupt you.'

She shook her head, feeling wrong-footed but obliged to offer him a seat. 'No, please, I'm sorry. I'm just surprised to see you. Please, sit down, Johan. I've ordered already, but we can share a pot of tea.'

'Thank you. Please, let me order another pot, and some of their cakes, perhaps? They are very good here.' He beckoned to the waitress with a charming smile and ordered tea and cake for them both, then turned his attention to her. 'So. You're back in London. I had heard you had left our shores for a more exotic place. How fortunate for you that you have travelled.'

She had watched him as he spoke to the waitress with a ready smile that had charmed her. The waitress had blushed slightly as he ordered from her and Carrie couldn't help a small smile at his effect on her, but then remembered how he had charmed her to follow him into his father's study, to lay down on the rug under the desk as he kissed her into a desire for an affection and closeness she had never known, persuading her to lift the skirts of her maids uniform and allow him to 'make love to her', as he had described it. Only when she'd realised that his idea of love was different from hers had she understood that he had used her and that there had never been any intention of a future with her, and that the baby she carried would never know a life where his father was present.

'I went to India with my husband. He was posted there for a while but it was necessary for me to come home. My brother was injured in the fire at the tannery and my family were struggling to take care of him.'

'He is better now?' Johan frowned. 'He was injured when I saw you at the tram stop with Ida Coyle. Surely he is better now? The fire

at the tannery was well over a year ago.'

Carrie felt herself go hot and she wondered if her lie had given her away. When she had told Pearl she was pregnant with Johan's child Pearl had begged her not to tell him the child was his because his family would have muddled her name. Since then she had never intended for Johan to find out about John, thought she would never see Johan again, let alone take tea with him in a London café. For the first time she wished she'd called John something else. 'Unfortunately, he worked at the munitions factory in Silver Town when it went up in January. When you saw us we had just left the hospital where Pearl had been admitted. Do you remember Pearl? She was also a maid at Nightingale Lane and sometimes shared my shifts with me.'

Johan delved into his memory, his eyes sliding to the side, and then he nodded. 'Yes, yes I remember her. A nice girl. Very polite and hardworking. Is she well now? She was injured too?'

'She is well, but in a wheelchair. We don't know if it's permanent. She and Tommy are married now, since May this year.'

'That is wonderful news. I'm glad they overcame their injuries. A happy ending, yes? And is your husband back in England now, or has his posting continued in India? I envy you that you have seen that country. How different the people are there.'

'My husband was posted back to England recently. And India was awful and wonderful at the same time. But I made some wonderful friends there. I believe you might know two of them, Dorothy and Marcus Tremaine? They live on Victoria Square.'

Johan shook his head. 'No, I haven't had the pleasure of meeting them. The residents of Victoria Square keep themselves very much to themselves.'

Carrie took a sip of her tea and looked out of the window. She wasn't surprised that Johan and Lizabet Stern had not met the Tremaines. Dorothy and Marcus were gregarious, social people. The Sterns had always been rather insular, their social circle very much in the Jewish communities and through their business connections which had always seemed more important to them than making life-long friends. The Sterns never missed an opportunity to make money.

'And you have a son, yes?'

She felt her voice catch in her throat. Here it is, she thought. This is where I lie through my teeth or just blurt it out. I can't tell him. I can't. 'Yes, yes, Gregory,' she lied.

'Ah, yes. I saw him the other day at the house. A fine-looking boy.' He stared hard at her. 'How old?'

'Twenty months,' she said, looking down at her cup.

'Nearly two. Not an easy age for parents.'

'Do you have children?'

For the first time during their meeting Johan looked disconcerted. He placed his cup carefully onto the saucer and inhaled a breath that seemed to wobble in his chest. Carrie was transfixed by the change in his manner, from charming confidence to morose. 'A boy, nine months old. He is...not very well, his heart, I'm afraid. We are...Lizabet is...we are desolate, very worried about him. The doctors say they have done everything they can, so now we wait. We wait to see if he will thrive.'

Carrie swallowed and watched Johan as he seemed to grow smaller in front of her eyes. He was only five years older than her but it occurred to her that he seemed much older. Clearly the worry of his son had aged him. 'I'm so sorry, Johan. Our children mean so much to us, don't they? Poor Lizabet. The worry and not knowing must be unbearable.'

'Yes, yes, it is. The doctors tell me Caleb is unlikely to survive, but Lizabet doesn't know this. I cannot bring myself to tell her. She will find out soon enough, I think.'

He drained his cup and rose from the table. 'Please, enjoy the rest of your tea. It is all taken care of.' She thanked him, her throat tightening with grief for him, and her memories of the love she had felt for him when she was too young to understand and didn't know any better. 'Perhaps I will see you again, Carrie. I cannot tell you how pleased I was to hear that you had taken over the house in Nightingale Lane and the good work you are doing there. It was a house of such happiness, at least until the war came and we could not stay. I wish you peace and good health. Shalom, Carrie.'

She watched him as he left the café. She realised that when they had met at the tram stop after leaving Pearl in the hospital there was something different about him, but she hadn't known what it was, couldn't put her finger on the subtle change that was like an aura around him. Now she knew. He was stooped like a much older man, weighed down by the worry of his ailing son and his devastated wife, not just physically, but emotionally too. This was not the Johan she remembered. The charm was still there, the velvet voice that could make you do anything he wanted was still present, but he was diminished. Perhaps he has also learnt some lessons, she thought, like I have, the hard way, but what a terrible way to learn humility.



THE BELGIAN REFUGEES in her care were so quiet Carrie often wondered if they had left without telling her. She worried about their reticence, the sense that they had no authority over their lives, but realised this was probably learned behaviour because of their shocking experiences before they left Belgium. She was reluctant to talk to them

about what had happened, yet like everyone else in the house would have liked to discover why they felt it necessary to leave their homeland. Carrie was also aware that there were many in Britain who felt the refugees should return to Belgium because they were taking jobs from women who needed to earn to keep their families while their husbands were away fighting.

The goodwill that had overwhelmed the refugees when they first arrived in London had since diminished. Every family had to be housed and Carrie had found notes put through her door, anonymous of course, that asked why she was giving refuge to foreigners who should have been fighting the Bosch in their own country instead of taking care of their boys who had returned from the fight abroad and needed care and assistance. Part of her agreed with the sentiment, but Carrie had her own fight, and she needed able-bodied men around her who would hopefully make Arnold think twice before he pushed his way into the house to make a claim on everything she had built. This was her dread, the nightmare that assaulted her sleep night after night, that Arnold Bateman, her husband and tormentor, would get drunk, force his way into her home, and never leave. She had confided this dread to Tommy who said he would never allow it to happen, but he was due to begin work on the redevelopment of Silver Town and would therefore not be around to stop him.



A FEW DAYS AFTER TOMMY had begun work he told her that more men were needed on the project, and if Joshka, Gregor and Asher, the father of the two girls would like to work, there was plenty to be had. Carrie encouraged the men to go to Silver Town with Tommy the very next day and line up to be given work. She knew that it had not been in her plan for the men to be out at work, rather that they would be there if she needed them, but as time moved forward and Arnold did not make an appearance she thought it was selfish of her to deny them the chance to earn money for their families, and also to stop men capable of working to make sure the homes in Silver Town were fit for families to live in.

‘Do you think it’s a good idea?’ Tommy asked her when Joshka and Asher had been so enthusiastic about going to work. ‘They seemed to like the chance to work again. It means they can pay their way here and also save some money for when they go back to Belgium.’

‘Yes, of course it’s a good idea. I can’t stop them providing for their families and they should pay their way. We’re not a charity, well not in that sense anyway. I’ve heard the comments made about them

taking assistance when our own need it just as much, especially lately with the explosion ending people's way to earn money and the increase in the bombing. It's not reported like it should be, sometimes we don't hear about it for days, but we know it's happening and the more it happens the more of our people need help. I think it will look good for them to work.' Tommy nodded and smiled, glad he hadn't made a mistake by suggesting it. 'And I've spoken to Ida about teaching the girls to cook, and encouraging Alitza and the girl's mother, Hannah, to make some dishes of their own so we can all join in. It's Pearl's birthday next week. I thought we could have a party.'

Tommy grinned. 'Really? A party? In the middle of a war?'

'We need it, don't we? Look how happy your wedding made everyone. I heard and saw laughter and happiness that day, something in short supply around here lately. Let's push the boat out a bit. We can invite Pearl's family and Dorothy and Marcus and their growing brood. It'll give us something to look forward to.'

'Yeah, alright. Should we make it a surprise d'you think? For Pearl.'

Carrie smiled and hugged him. 'Even better.'

Ida reluctantly agreed to allow Alitza and Hannah into her kitchen with a tacit understanding that if they started to take over Carrie would explain that Ida was the cook and needed her kitchen.

'Why would they take over, Ida,' Carrie asked her. 'They know whose kitchen this is, they know you plan the menus for everyone. Also I think it would be good for them to learn some of the lovely things you make, the cakes, tarts and blancmanges.'

Ida still looked unsure. 'Do you think they eat peasant food? Will our boys want to eat peasant food?'

Carrie shrugged. 'They will if it tastes good. You know what they're like, especially when they begin to feel better. They can't get enough of your food. I tell you what, I'll speak to Joshka, he seems to have the best knowledge of English, and ask him what their national dishes are. Would that be alright?'

Ida pulled a face and picked up her potato peeler. 'I s'pose so.'



'WE LOVE STOEMP IN BELGIUM,' said Joshka. 'It is like...potato,' he made a mashing gesture with his hands.

'Oh, mash,' cried Carrie. 'Mashed potato.'

Joshka nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes, yes, with other vegetables, er, carrot...and cabbage...all together, in oven, very tasty, with sausage made from chicken?'

'That sounds good.' Carrie took a pencil from the dresser and wrote

everything down so she would forget anything. Ida, Alitza and Hannah would go to the market together to get the things they need. She hadn't suggested this yet to Ida and she wondered how she would take it. 'Anything else?'

'Waterzooi.'

Carrie's eyes widened. 'Water...zoo...i. Is that right?'

Joshka laughed. 'Yes, yes. It is like your stew, with vegetables, egg, and some cream.'

'Right,' Carrie answered, feverishly writing.

'And we have sweet food, Speculaas, biscuit? With, I think you say, toffee, inside? Very spicy. We have with tea or coffee. So good.'

Carrie grinned. 'Thank you, Joshka. I will tell Ida. I'm hoping your mother will make these lovely things for us. And Hannah too.'

Joshka looked happy and Carrie was sure she'd hit the right note. 'My mother will be very proud to cook for you, Carrie, and the young men you help. She needs to...work. My mother is used to working, in her own house, her kitchen. This is hard for her.'

'I know, Joshka. It must be so difficult to be away from everything you know.'

'It is, but we pray. We pray that soon we will home again. Please, you have been very good to us, Carrie. We could not have wished for more, from you and Mrs Coyle and Tommy and Pearl. You are all such good people, but our home...it is special to us.'

'I understand, Joshka. Everyone loves their own home. You have all been through a terrible time. I hope soon you can return to your home country and be safe.'



Chapter 50

The group of women, Belgian and English, left the house with Ida following behind, shopping bag in hand. Carrie stood behind them watching them as they went through the front door, smiling at Ida's reluctance. Just as she crossed the threshold Ida turned and stared at Carrie.

'I hope this is a good idea, Carrie. You know I'm not sure. I go to the same people at the market and they know me. I don't know what they'll think of me turning up with strangers.'

Carrie laughed. 'I should think if they spend money they'll be pleased to see them,' she said.

'Are they paying for their own stuff then?'

'Of course. Joshka, Gregor and Benjamin are earning now. They said they're pleased to help out. I'm not sure what will be available to you bearing in mind how the shortages are hitting us all now, but do what you can. You buy what you usually get but give them a free hand. It will be nice to try something different, and we might all learn something from each other.'

Ida shrugged and sighed dramatically. 'If you say so, ducky.' Carrie giggled to herself and joined Pearl who sat at the kitchen table, making biscuits.

'Oh, dear,' she chuckled. 'Someone's not happy.'

Carrie laughed again. 'No, but she'll be alright. I understand how she feels though. This has always been Ida's kitchen and will go back to being solely her kitchen when our guests go home. These women need something to do. They sit in their rooms day after day, doing nothing apart from some mending. It must be very depressing don't you think? And they don't seem to speak to each other much, either.'

'How awful it must be to just up and leave your home, the place you know best in the world, without any of your personal things, just the clothes you have on your back. And Alitza and Gregor are not young. The journey must have been difficult for them. I know our boys are over at the front, but at least their families can stay in their own homes,' she glanced up at Carrie, 'as long as they don't get blown to bits in a munitions explosion.'

Carrie pulled a small smile and rubbed Pearl's arm affectionately. 'You're here, Pearl. You survived it, maybe not in one piece, but you'll soon bring another little life into the world, something you thought wouldn't happen. It's so wonderful, and hopefully this awful war that's hurting so many people will be over soon.'

Pearl nodded, looked up at Carrie and smiled. 'I'm praying for it,' she said.

'Me too,' said Carrie.



IDA, ALITZA, HANNAH and the two girls, Lila and Rebekah came back from the market smiling and chatting in a mixture of languages and hand gestures. Carrie was transfixed by the change in Ida. She and Alitza were at the back of the group making themselves understood to each other. When Ida threw back her head and laughed at a gesture Alitza made with her hands, Carrie's heart was fit to burst. It had worked. Sending the women to market together was the best thing she could have done. The universal language of shopping had brought them together as she hoped it would.

The woman took their bags of vegetables, flour, a little sugar they had managed to find from one of Ida's contacts, to make a special meal for that evening. Carrie felt sure if they could work together on one meal for the whole household, the party for Pearl would surely happen, hopefully with some unusual food that they had never eaten before.

That afternoon Alitza, Hannah, Lila and Rebekah found themselves under the careful and exacting ministrations of Ida, who taught them how to make a liver and bacon dumpling, and a blancmange in the shape of a rabbit which Lila and Rebekah exclaimed over with excitement and astonishment. Ida taught them a few words; blancmange and rabbit, and explained that she thought blancmange was a French word but couldn't be sure, and that if it was 'they probably stole it from the English, anyway'. Carrie thought the girls were probably wondering why the blancmange was in the shape of a rabbit, but as she didn't know either decided to keep quiet.

The laughter from the kitchen was infectious, Ida's the loudest voice of all. It brought Pearl out from her sitting room, pale after a bout of morning sickness, but bright-eyed and wanting to join in. The seven women worked alongside one another, the huge pine kitchen table awash with vegetables, potatoes ready for mashing with butter and cream, soft, fluffy dumplings made by Alitza waiting to be boiled then fried, and the biscuits made by Hannah, Lila and Rebekah, Joshka had enthused about to Carrie, the strangely named, Speculaas.

That evening they shared a meal they had made together, sitting around the huge dining table that could seat so many people, elbows rubbing, but the closeness not bothering them at all as it had when they'd first all met. Tommy had raised his eyebrows at Carrie, a grin spreading across his face, his wonder and pride at his sister's talent for

bringing people together, something his shyness had prevented him getting the hang of. Even Gregor seemed brightened that Alitza had seemingly found a new friend in Ida, a woman of roughly the same age with an interest in cooking. He watched his wife with amused eyes as he forked the steaming dumpling filled with liver and crispy bacon into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. He glanced at Carrie sitting at the head of the table and lifted his fork to her, a smile playing on his lips. She nodded to him, then bent her head and smiled to herself. This was a moment she would cherish.

She glanced at John in his highchair. He sat next to Joshka who kept him amused by making funny faces and helping him with his food. John giggled, relishing the attention he was getting from everyone around the table. Their guests from Belgium were clearly family oriented and Carrie wondered about John and whether he missed a father-figure in his life. A rush of sadness went through her. David loomed up in her mind's eye. She wondered how he was, whether he was still at the Alexandria; she had made enquiries but staff had resisted her entreaties for news, telling her that the information she required was private and they were not allowed to divulge anything about Captain Lawrence's treatment or whereabouts. She had accepted this with stoicism, but then, once home, had gone to her room, thrown herself on her bed and cried and cried. Afterwards she had felt silly, chastising herself for wasting time crying over something she could do nothing about, and when she'd told Pearl about it her friend had said her tears were natural, a human thing, and that she shouldn't feel bad about it.

After the meal they went back to their own little sanctuaries in 99 Nightingale Lane, Gregor and Alitza to their room, he to read, she to mend, Joshka went to the pub with Tommy, Joshka pushing Pearl in her wheelchair while Tommy held her hand. Benjamin and Hannah took Lila and Rebekah up the three flights of stairs to their rooms in the attic, now suitably furnished and carpeted, to put the girls to bed and to spend time together. Ida joined Carrie in her sitting room and shared a pot of tea and the remaining Speculaas.

'It was a good day, Carrie,' said Ida. 'A good thing you did.'

Carrie looked up in surprise. 'I didn't do anything.'

'Yes you did, ducky. You always amaze me, so young and yet such a head on your shoulders. I wish my Francis was more like you. She bred all those kids of hers as if it was going out of fashion, without a thought of how she would feed them, and then when her husband upped and left her before the war she never knew how she was going to cope. It's only thanks to you that she's managed to keep 'em fed with a roof over their heads.'

Carrie bit into a biscuit, relishing the buttery, spicy flavour. 'You

wouldn't have let them starve, Ida. You would have helped them.'

Ida nodded. 'Yes, but it's better this way. She's working here and earning her own money. It's given her some respect for herself. It's all we want isn't it, Carrie, a bit of respect and friendship.'

'D'you know, Ida, you're right. And we do have it here, don't we?'

'Oh, yes, my love. We certainly do. Our lives aren't perfect, we're in the middle of a war, after all, but I think we're about as near as we can get.' She went quiet. 'And it would be even better if that captain of yours would sort hisself out.' Carrie closed her eyes and drew her lips into a small smile. 'Have you 'eard anything?' Ida asked in an almost whisper.

Carrie shook her head. 'I'm not allowed to hear.'

Ida frowned. 'What d'you mean?'

'I went to The Alexandria last week. I'm not allowed to ask about him. He doesn't want anyone to know what's happening to him, his treatment, or even where he is. If he left there I wouldn't know. I'm not allowed to know.'

Ida shook her head with exasperation. 'But that don't mean to say he can't know about *you*.'

Carrie stared at her. 'How would that happen?'

'Write him a letter.'

'A letter,' said Carrie, staring off into the distance. 'Why didn't I think of that?'

'Cause you're too close to it. You're trying to do your best for everyone while dealing with your own unhappiness. Course you can't think of everything. But a letter is the best way to go. Just cause 'e don't want you to know about him, don't mean he can't know about you, do it.'



Chapter 51

David Lawrence sat on the end of the bed looking out of the bay window in his room. He noticed that the leaves were beginning to turn, very slightly at the edges, from the dark green of high summer to the oranges and reds that heralded the beginning of the autumn temperatures. It was September, August had come to a close, and he would welcome the end of summer, not with any sense of excitement, but purely with resigned acceptance that it was the way of things. The days had been far too long, each one had dragged interminably and the thought of the nights closing in earlier brought him scant optimism.

It was nearly time for the evening meal. The odour of food had wafted along the corridor from the kitchens, meat and onions probably. It was Tuesday. They usually had meat and onions on a Tuesday, although heaven knows what kind of meat it actually was. Some of the men took a sweepstake each Tuesday on whether it was mutton or beef, doubtfully chicken, much too expensive. He thought it was mutton. He thought it was usually mutton. And afterwards there would be trifle...with little fruit, even less custard and a thin layer of jelly, but they still called it trifle. They always had trifle on a Tuesday.

He looked down at his hands in his lap, mostly at his right hand that held a letter, a letter from Carrie. He hadn't read it but he knew it was from her, recognised the neat script, the letters so tiny as though they had been written on the page with an apology, an expression of regret at the audacity of taking up room on the page. The nurse had brought it in to him, asking if he wanted it to be returned to whoever had sent it bearing in mind he had stated he didn't want to hear from anyone. No contact he had stipulated. Whatsoever. Not family. Not friends. Not lover. So not Carrie. He had held out his hand and taken it from the nurse, saying if he changed his mind he would leave it on the desk in reception. She'd nodded, thinking that maybe he was regretting his decision, but somewhat doubting it because apparently he had been so adamant.

His eyes rested on the envelope again. It had been delivered by hand, no postage stamp in the corner. He saw her in his mind's eye, wearing a pale blue cotton dress and matching shoes, and carrying a parasol to protect herself from the unforgiving sun of the clear unbroken skies of the Indian summer; her hand, shaking a little as she took the champagne cocktail from his, her smile, beautiful, clear, her teeth sparkling like polished pearls. He closed his eyes. He had fallen

so hard for her, a married woman, but he hadn't had the strength to put her out of his mind. She had returned the love he'd professed, but the man she had fallen for was no more. That man didn't exist, couldn't exist, had seen too much, had heard more than he had ever wanted to. These were the images that clouded the ones he had of Carrie. These were the memories his mind wouldn't allow him to overcome. How could he ever offer her the life they had planned together at a time when he was whole in his mind and body, a man with confidence in his own abilities, with direction, who was looked up to by his men. His men, the ones who no longer walked the earth, blown to bits on the fields of war, the fellow soldiers he should have protected.

But of course protection had been impossible. The chaos around him had been like a cacophony, an orchestra in total disharmony, difficult to direct, to predict. His orders to his men had fallen on deaf ears as one by one, second by second, they had left the trenches to run towards the Bosch, and one by one they had been felled. Some died immediately, most didn't, their screams of agony assaulting his ears and turning his stomach to liquid, his legs to jelly.

He'd run out by their side, his rifle poised, his heart beating so hard he thought it would give up pumping the blood around his body. He'd almost wished for it, to allow him to sink into the mud, his breath taken from him, his lungs deflated, an act of God, he was so sure he would die along with his men, his limbs shot from his torso or his stomach ripped out by shrapnel. As he ran from the trench onto the field he saw what remained of his unit, the carnage, the bones stripped of flesh, the smell of blood and excrement from men who only a few months before had been ordinary men, some with young families, some just boys, young men who hadn't even begun their lives. How could they have ever known they would end their lives like this? Why were they being sent into the fighting like lambs to the slaughter with no chance of avoiding the inevitable? As he ran, firing, ducking, slipping on the blood, entrails and severed limbs of those who had gone before, he had thought it was no different to murder. His men had been murdered by a decision taken by anonymous men who weren't even in France, who sat around a table hundreds of miles away and made an arbitrary decision based on a flawed plan, because the loss of all these desperate men could not win a war or quell the advance of an enemy.

And now. Now all he could hear when he closed his eyes at the end of the day was the sound of cannons, the explosion of shells, the screams of men who had been ripped apart. His body was intact. He had received an injury to his leg from flying shrapnel, a deep wound that would leave an unsightly scar, and a cut above his eye, a miracle

he knew, because he had managed to get to a group of trees which gave him cover, and fire on the enemy from a place of relative safety.

But his mind. His mind was like the bodies of those men he had seen on the field of battle, ripped to shreds, uncontrollable, leaking lifeblood, his thoughts taking him to the place he did not want to go. The horror would not leave him. It had him in its grasp, gripping him tightly even in his dreams; the nightmares, so realistic he travelled back to the front every night and relived the sight of the macabre cutting down of his men, the heart-wrenching loss of so many of his friends. He had asked himself again and again, 'Could I have done more? Could I have saved them?' It was a question he could not answer. He would never know if he could have done things differently, and if he had would he have saved them. They were gone. Forever. Never to return to the place they called home. And his mind had gone with them.

'Captain Lawrence?' A soft voice from the bedroom door pulled him out of his thoughts. 'It's time for dinner. Your place is ready.'

He nodded and looked down at the letter again. 'Not yet, Carrie,' he said under his breath. 'Not yet.' He slid the letter into a book he'd been trying to read since he'd arrived at The Alexandria Nursing Home but hadn't got far into because he couldn't concentrate, allowing the corner of the pale blue envelope to show from between the yellowing pages, then rose from the bed, and like every other day at this time, made his way to the dining room.



'YOU RECEIVED A LETTER, I understand?' Dr. Marston looked down at his notes, then glanced up at David waiting for his reply. David nodded. 'And you accepted it.' David nodded again. 'I was surprised to hear it.'

'Were you? Why?'

'I was led to believe you wanted no contact with anyone you knew.'

'That still stands.'

'Yet you accepted the letter.'

'Someone took the time to write it.'

'You've read it?'

'No.'

Dr Marston inhaled and crossed one leg over the other. 'You were fortunate it was offered to you. The nurse started here only recently. If it had been one of the other nurses who took it from the person who delivered it, it would not have been given to you.'

'As I'd requested.'

‘Yes, so you did.’ Dr. Marston waited for him to continue, while David hoped this was not going to be like some of the other sessions he had had with him where no one said anything. ‘You know who wrote it?’

‘I do.’

Dr. Marston reversed the crossing of his legs, the left over the right this time. ‘How are you feeling, David?’

David shrugged. ‘How am I supposed to feel?’

‘There’s no right or wrong way for you to get back to full health. You knew it would take time...a great deal of time for you to feel that you could join society again and be as you were.’

‘How will I ever be as I was, Dr. Marston? How can that be possible after what has happened?’

‘It is possible, but you have taken on the mantle of responsibility for what happened to your unit, and that is a hurdle you must overcome. My telling you, you were not responsible for their deaths will likely be of no help to you because you are telling yourself the opposite. I am a doctor, yes, but my opinion is of someone who was not there when those things happened, and I know this is something you question.’

‘It’s not just that.’

Dr. Marston tried not to take a breath, didn’t want to give David any reason not to speak about his feelings. He had been a hard nut to crack, his guilt and anger at himself were feelings that were difficult to dissolve. Dr. Marston was convinced it was because David was a man of honour, a brave man who had done all he could for his men under the most devastating of circumstances. The hard part was encouraging him to believe it of himself.

‘Oh?’

‘Carrie.’

‘Your wife?’

‘Not yet. Probably not ever. Not now.’

‘I see.’

‘Do you?’

‘I think so.’

‘She’s waiting for me.’

Dr. Marston nodded his understanding. ‘Is that a bad thing? She loves you. Would you prefer that she didn’t love you and didn’t wait for you to recover?’ David didn’t answer, but looked to the floor, his eyes now glistening with tears. This was the first time he had shown emotion during a session, and Dr. Marston knew it was a turning point.

‘I want...I would like to be what I was...to her. I treated her terribly when all she did was try to help.’

‘She runs a convalescent home, doesn’t she, for soldiers?’ David nodded. ‘And she has helped many others.’ He nodded again. ‘But not you.’

‘No.’

‘You blame her?’

David inhaled. ‘No...it’s not her fault I’m...broken. A broken man.’ David paused, then opened his mouth to say something but changed his mind.

‘Don’t waste it.’

David narrowed his eyes and held Dr. Marston’s gaze for a few seconds. ‘Waste it?’

‘The thought, the one you were about to release.’

David lifted his chin in understanding. ‘I promised her the man I was, Doctor, not the man I am now.’

‘Yet she persists in trying to see you, even delivering the letter by hand in the hope you would relent. I can’t help thinking you have wrapped yourself in chains, her too, chains that keep you apart, but she continues to attempt to shake them off. She cannot do it without your permission, David. If you refuse to give it you will get your wish of never seeing her again.’

David paled, his face blanched with fear. ‘It’s not my wish. I have never wished for it.’

‘All I can say to that is, don’t leave it too late. Do you trust her?’

‘Yes, of course. I couldn’t love someone I didn’t trust.’

‘Then trust her to make the correct decision. My guess is that she will wait for you no matter what. That is something we all hope for in our lives, David, someone who loves us enough to wait for us, to support us when the chips are down. She is familiar with men who have fought in France, who have been damaged, both physically and mentally, some seemingly beyond repair, yet she has helped them. They have gone on, either to return to the front, or, if their injuries too great, to their homes and families. I urge you to resist being the one she failed to help.’



HE WOKE WITH A START, his skin overlaid with a sheen of sweat, the heat from his body threatening to melt him, even though the snow lay thick on the lawn outside his window and every following night’s temperature was lower than the one before. The room was spinning and he closed his eyes to stop the revolving walls as nausea rose from his stomach to his throat. He breathed deeply as he’d been advised, the panic gradually subsiding, the revolving room coming to a stop. He gritted his teeth and thanked all that was holy that the attack was

over. He would never get used to this surge of adrenalin powering through his body, and he wondered if there would ever be a time when it didn't beleaguer his sleep.

He sat up and poured water into a glass from a carafe on his night table. Sipping it slowly he exhaled to a count of five, then breathed in again, feeling the palpitations of his heart reduce until the sound of his blood racing around his body and pulsing in his ears disappeared. As he replaced the glass on the table his eyes fell on the book, the corner of the pale blue envelope peeking out as if to dare him to open it. He wondered if this was the right time, then decided there would never be a right time, and slipped the envelope out from the book's pages. He turned the envelope over in his hands, squinting at the writing on the front, then sat up and switched on the lamp by his bedside. He knew once he ran his finger under the flap of the envelope and pulled the paper from within there would be no going back.

He slipped his thumb into the envelope releasing the flap, and took out two sheets of blue flimsy paper, unfolding it before reaching for his glasses, a recent necessity. He swallowed hard, staring at the familiar handwriting, then folded the letter in two. He dragged his eyes away for a moment and stared through the gap in the curtains, knowing there was still time to replace the letter back in the envelope and pretend it didn't exist. He didn't have to read it. He looked down again, slowly unfolded it, and began to read.

Dearest David.

I write this letter with the faintest hope that you might read it. With all my heart I hope you do. Your decision not to see me or your friends is your choice, but even with the choice you have made I wanted you to know how much you're missed.

You are still in my heart, David, and always, always in my thoughts. I told you before you were admitted to The Alexandria Hospital that I would wait for you no matter how long it took for you to feel that you could return to us, and that vow will never change. That is my promise and it is a promise I will keep. I love you. You are still the man I fell in love with in Secunderabad. I know how you've suffered, and still suffer, and it breaks my heart to think of you being in such terrible pain while I'm unable to be with you to give you my undying support, to hold your hand and help you through the worst of times.

Here at number ninety-nine life goes on. We are taking care of a group of Jewish Belgian refugees who came over to England when life in their homeland became too dangerous for them to stay. Like you, they too have been through so much, but we have all become friends and the atmosphere here is very uplifting. The influx of young men joining us for rehabilitation continues, and with our care (and Ida Coyle's wonderful cooking) they leave here with hopefully the knowledge of how much their efforts at the

front are appreciated and of the pride we have in them. I'm only deeply sorry that I could not do the same for you, but I know the doctors and nurses looking after you are the absolute best and will take good care of you until you are better and ready to come home. Please remember, David, that I and John, and everyone here would love you to return. We miss you terribly. I, of course most of all.

I love you with all my heart and remain truly yours.

Until we see each other again,

I send my enduring love to you, David.

Carrie xxx

Tears dropped from David's chin onto the letter, smudging some of the words Carrie had written. He closed his eyes and pictured her, her eyes, a velvety blue that had captured him when he first laid eyes on her, the way her hair swept in waves across her shoulders and fell down her back. Her kindness to the soldiers in her care, her laughter echoing throughout the house, lifting the spirits of those men whose lives had been shattered but had been nursed back to health and strength by Carrie, Ida and Pearl with respect and understanding. He thought too of Tommy, his face so terribly burned, yet who could still find a smile and joke for him, offering to read to him or join him in a game of chess. These were the people he had turned away from, the ones who had offered him stability when he had been found wandering the streets of London in a fog of vagueness, his head fuzzy with all he'd seen and heard at the front after he'd left the military hospital. He hadn't been truthful to the doctors there, had told them that he was taking a bed from someone who really needed it and that he should be discharged, that he had a home to go to and would thrive better there. They had chosen to believe him. David Lawrence was a captain in the British army, had seen warfare and survived. Why would he lie? Unaware that his mind was damaged, he had been released. He had become disorientated and forgotten who he was, believing he was back in France and running from enemy fire. It was simply chance that led him to be found by two soldiers on leave and taken to Nightingale Lane, but even though the relief of finding her had almost melted him, he quickly realised, even though he didn't care to admit it, that expecting Carrie to heal his terrible mental anguish was impossible.

He knew he needed expert medical help, but to acknowledge it made him feel weak, like a lesser man. The thought that he couldn't be to Carrie what he had hoped was too much for him to bear. She had made the decision, had taken it out of his hands and had him admitted to a place of which he thought he would never see the inside; a psychiatric unit for men suffering with shell shock and warfare trauma. It had angered him in his confused state of mind that

she had taken the decision from his hands. Her actions had simply underlined his frailty and he had resented it. It was the reason he had prevented her and his friends admittance to Alexandria's, knowing it was kinder to her to include everyone in that decision and not just her alone.

He refolded the letter and placed it in the envelope, wiping the tears from his cheeks with the heel of his hand. Light was pushing through the gap in the curtains and he realised he had been sitting with the letter in his hands for hours, just looking at it, turning it over and over while his thoughts took him to a place he had not visited for months because he knew it would break him to linger there, even in his mind. Carrie deserved better. She had suffered because of him; his anger had been misdirected and had hit her just as surely as gunfire had hit his men. You always hurt the ones you love. It was a song, he thought.. He had loved Carrie more than anyone he had ever met, still loved her deeply, but in his heart he questioned if his love had brought her more hurt than happiness, and whether he could ever find the strength to become the man he so desperately wanted to be.



Chapter 52

December stepped forward to be acknowledged in a flurry of icy rain and plummeting temperatures. Carrie scraped the inside of the window with her fingernail to peer outside, shivering at the sight of the frost on the railings and the grey skies, and went across to the fire to put on another log, wondering how the men in France could survive the wet, muddy conditions now likely overlaid with snow. She shivered again, knowing they would need to anticipate even more men coming to them for care, even through Christmas which was only ten days away.

A knock on the door to her sitting room evaporated her thoughts and she straightened up to answer it.

‘Come in.’

Ida poked her head around the door, not wanting to impose. ‘Did you send it, ducky? The letter, I mean?’

Carrie smiled affectionately at Ida and beckoned her in. ‘I did, Ida. I took your advice and wrote to him. I took it myself and gave it to the nurse and waited for about fifteen minutes in the foyer.’ Carrie sat in one of the wing armchairs near the fire and encouraged Ida to do the same. ‘I think the nurse thought it was a bit strange me just sitting there, waiting, and I know she wanted to say something, but I knew what I was waiting for.’

‘And what was that?’

‘To see if she had the letter in her hand when she came back from David’s room.’

Ida sat forward in her chair, anticipating the answer. ‘And did she?’

Carrie gave a small smile and a brief shake of her head. ‘No,’ she said sotto voce.

Ida clapped her hands with glee. ‘So he read it, then?’

Carrie shrugged. ‘I s’pose there’s no guarantee of that, but it looks like he kept it.’ She sighed. ‘Oh, Ida, I hope he reads it. I just want him to know how much he is loved, that we’re missing him and want him back. I don’t know what else I can do.’

‘Nothing, sweetheart. You’ve done everything you can. It’s up to him now. You’ve told him how you feel, what more can you do?’

‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful if he came back for Christmas, Ida. Think of the get-togethers we could have with everyone here. Will Francis and the children stay, d’you think? John would love it if they did. He needs the company of children. And Dorothy, Marcus, the girls

and the twins, and Tommy and Pearl, you and me. And our new friends from Belgium. And if David were here...if only he could be.'

Tears glistened in Ida's eyes for the girl she had come to look on as a daughter. No one deserved to be loved and cherished more than Carrie. She had given so much to so many, had come through some difficult times and still had a smile for everyone. She thought about little John and Arnold Bateman. Of course Bateman wasn't John's father, any fool could see that. Ida had a good idea about who his real father was, but until Carrie confided in her she could never say anything. It didn't matter anyway. The child was adored by his mother and would grow surrounded by love and stability. She knew Carrie would see to it.

As far as Ida could see there was only one blot on the horizon that wouldn't sort itself out, and that was Arnold Bateman. Unknown to Carrie, he had been back to the house every other day to talk to her, bully her more like, Ida thought, but she hadn't told Carrie, had made excuses to him about one thing or another. She knew she couldn't keep it up much longer. The time would come when he would play his hand and Ida wouldn't be able to protect Carrie any longer. With the men across at Silver Town rebuilding and renovating she had no one to back her up. Ida's husband used to call her, 'my old dragon,' affectionately she knew, but she also knew that this old dragon was getting older and her tongue of fire was dimming. How long she could continue putting Bateman off was anyone's guess, but she would keep doing it until he got the better of her. As yet he hadn't forced his way in, but she guessed it was his next step. Arnold Bateman wouldn't give up, that was certain, but he'd have to step over her dead body to get to the girl she loved.



99 Nightingale Lane

Part 5



Chapter 53



JOHN RAN TO THE WINDOW squealing with delight, and knelt up on the upholstered window seat in Carrie's bedroom.

'Mama, Mama, snow. It's snow.'

Carrie chuckled to herself when she pulled back the curtain and saw only a fine smattering of snow covering the railings outside making the flagstones sparkle. 'Oh, yes, John, so there is. Isn't it pretty?'

He turned to her, his eyes shining like the baubles they'd placed on the Christmas tree at the front of the house. 'Snowman?'

She leant down and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on his soft dark brown curls, inhaling his just bathed smell of soap and baby powder. 'Oh, sweetheart, I don't think there's enough for that. We'll have to see how much snow falls. If there's enough by tomorrow we'll go out into the garden with the others and make a big snowman. We'll call it John, would that be alright?'

He turned to her again, disappointment etching his face, his eyebrows drawn up into a knot. 'Not now?'

'I'm sorry, John, not now. There isn't enough snow. Let's wait until tomorrow. I promise you if there's enough snow we'll make the best snowman in London.'

'Will he be a soldier?'

'Of course. We'll ask one of the boys if we can borrow a cap or scarf. How does that sound?'

John nodded, then squealed again, pointing out of the window. 'Dotty, Dotty, Dotty.'

Carrie pushed back the curtain. In the street below Dorothy stepped out of a motor car with Dotty and Seraphina. The children's nanny followed her with the twins, Violet and Sebastian in a baby basket, one at each end, snuggled in a satin-edged blanket against the chill weather. Dorothy's outfit drew admiring glances from passers-by in Nightingale Lane, her fur trimmed coat with an attached cloak, fur hat, soft leather gloves and leather boots made her the height of fashion, nothing like the belted jacket and long grey skirt she wore for

the suffragette rallies she attended. Carrie smiled to herself. It was something she had never expected to see; Dorothy as a parent to four children, but her family had grown quickly with the death of her sister, Naomi and her pledge to give her girls a loving home. The birth of the twins meant she had an extremely busy life, one she had never envisaged.

John slid off the window seat and ran out onto the landing, then taking the stairs very carefully with both hands sliding down the wall he reached the bottom stair and ran down the hall to the front door shrieking Dotty's name. Carrie followed him, laughing at his excitement, and opened the front door with a huge smile to find Arnold Bateman standing on the front step. Dorothy, the nanny and the children were standing on the pavement behind him.

The smile dropped from Carrie's face when she saw him on the front step, standing with his feet apart to prevent Dorothy and her brood's admittance. 'Arnold,' Carrie said flatly. 'What are you doing here? Can't you see I have visitors?'

At the sound of Arnold's name Ida Coyle rushed out of the kitchen, her apron skew-whiff, a rolling pin in her hand, her face like thunder. She stood behind Carrie, the rolling pin held up to shoulder height, ready to defend Carrie in case Arnold should push his way in. 'Go home, Mr. Bateman,' she said. 'You're not wanted here.'

Dorothy frowned and stepped up to the front door, confidently elbowing Arnold aside. 'Come, children, Nanny. We were invited this morning,' she glanced at Bateman, 'unlike some.'

'Mrs. Tremaine,' Arnold said, tipping his Fedora patronisingly towards her. Dorothy ignored him and she and the children passed him on the step and went into the sitting room.

'What do you want, Arnold?' asked Carrie. 'I told you before, I have nothing to say to you.' She met Dorothy's eyes as she walked past her, who squeezed her forearm.

'Ah, but I have plenty to say to you, Mrs. Bateman. We have things to discuss.'

'It's coming up to Christmas, Arnold. I've a house full of people and a family Christmas to prepare for. I don't have time for this.'

'Clearly, Carrie, you could do with more help.' He glanced behind her at Ida. 'Or different help, maybe, someone more capable.'

Ida raised the rolling pin ready to clout him but Carrie put a hand on her arm. 'The people who work here are not your concern. Now, get off my step or I'll call the police.'

He smirked. 'And you think they'll do what?'

'If I tell them you're threatening me they'll do plenty.'

He shrugged, the patronising look back on his face. 'Not so, I think you'll find. As your husband I have rights.'

‘Really. Shall we put it to the test. What about your unit Captain, who is it again, Captain Foster if I remember. I wonder what he will think of you ‘befriending’ the young soldiers in your own special way, Arnold. Shall we tell him about that? I think your so-called career in the army might take a bit of a nosedive, as it were.’

‘Well done, Carrie,’ Ida muttered, although she had no idea what Carrie meant.

Arnold looked at her with eyes as black as coal. ‘They won’t believe you.’

‘But do you want to find out if they believe me, Arnold, that’s the question I’d be asking myself if I were you.’

He turned on his heel and stood on the pavement, taking a packet of cigarettes from his inside pocket and lighting one which he put to his lips, his eyes narrowing through the plume of smoke. ‘Think you’ve got it all sussed out, don’t you? I’ve been to a solicitor.’

Carrie’s heart dropped. ‘So what?’

‘You’ll know, ‘so what’ when you hear from him.’

‘I won’t hold my breath.’

He turned to walk down Nightingale Lane, the smirk fixed on his face, but as he walked away the smirk dropped from his lips and his face darkened with the thought of the storm he planned to release on Carrie Dobbs.



THE USUAL RHYTHM OF the house continued as it ever did, but with a merrier atmosphere because of the imminent festivities. With Christmas around the corner, Carrie, Ida, Pearl and Tommy were filled with a sense of optimism. They were all aware that 1918 would bring a new adventure for them with the birth of Pearl and Tommy’s child in February. Carrie did her best to forget Arnold’s threat, and when she had discussed it with Dorothy, Dorothy was dismissive of him.

‘What can he do, darling? Honestly, what can he do? Is he going to forcibly drag you, and the boys in your care, and Mrs Coyle and Pearl, and the Belgian refugees out of the house by the hair? His threats are empty. He’s a jumped-up little pipsqueak.’

‘I know what you’re saying is true, Dorothy, but he threatened to take John. I gave birth to him after I married Arnold. If he says John is his son how am I to deny it without damaging my reputation, casting a shadow over John, and possibly forced to name his real father? It would cause so much trouble.’

Dorothy leant towards the decorative side-table by the settee, opened a beautiful marble cigarette case and took a cigarette from it, lighting it with a match from a huge crystal box.

‘I knew there was something worrying you more than just the house. I know how much you love number ninety-nine and the work you do there is phenomenal, but I was sure there was more to your worries.’ She blew out a perfect smoke ring and stretched her arms above her head, leaning back in the settee to release her aching muscles. She was tired after a sleepless night with the twins, both of whom suffered from colic, and even with Nurse Field’s assistance had spent hours walking the bedroom floor, hoping to rock them off to sleep. She sighed and glanced at Carrie, wondering if she should say what was on the tip of her tongue.

‘I wondered,’ she said.

Carrie raised her eyebrows and waited. ‘Oh, yes. What were you wondering?’

‘About Johan Stern.’

Carrie glanced away, knowing what was coming next. It was something she had also considered. ‘What about him?’

‘You could tell him about John. At least that way John will be safe from Arnold. I’m sure Johan would corroborate your story. And you have John’s birth certificate, don’t you? That would confirm your dates.’

Carrie sighed looking troubled, and not a little embarrassed. ‘Except that I’ve already told Johan that John is called Gregory and is months younger than he really is so that he wouldn’t put two and two together and come up with five.’

Dorothy raised her eyebrows and took a deep pull on her cigarette, blowing the smoke to the ceiling. ‘Don’t you mean four, darling. Let’s face it, Johan Stern is an intelligent man. He received the best education money can buy, so I’m fairly sure he can count. Just because things didn’t go as you expected them to when you were pregnant with John, it doesn’t mean Johan has forgotten what happened between you, although I can understand why you’ve assumed that. And the likeness, Carrie. John is nothing like Arnold Bateman. All his looks are Johan Stern, apart from his eyes.’ She frowned. ‘And when on earth did you tell him about “Gregory”?’

‘The last time I visited, remember? I walked home instead of taking the tram and went into a little teashop for a cuppa and to think. Johan passed the window and he saw me sitting alone. I was thinking about Arnold at the time and I thought how ironic it was that Johan should appear out of the blue like that. He asked if he could join me at my table.’

Dorothy’s eyes widened. ‘Oh my goodness. You mustn’t have thought he would do that.’

‘You’re right, I didn’t. In fact when I saw him pass the window I prayed he would keep going, even found myself ducking slightly,

except he looked into the teashop window and saw me, and I could hardly tell him he couldn't sit with me, could I? He told me that he and Lizabet have a son, Caleb, who is very unwell. Heart problems. Just a baby of nine months.'

'That's incredibly sad.'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, he's very worried, about Lizabet too. I don't think she's coping. Well, who would? She's his mother and Caleb's their only child. He says he knows that Caleb will probably not survive and that he hasn't told Lizabet because she will know soon enough.'

'How awful. Poor man...poor all of them.'

'Yes...but can you see my dilemma, Dorothy? How could I tell him he had another son when he and Lizabet are going through something so terrible. And I s'pose I must be honest about it, with you, anyway. I never planned to tell him about John. I just didn't think it was necessary after I'd left England. Being in India meant I was so far away from Johan I didn't need to think about him anymore. It was almost like he didn't exist.'

Dorothy pulled a face. 'He may see it very differently, particularly now you and John are back in London.'

Carrie nodded looking miserable. 'I know. I've thought about it, what it could mean to John to have a father in his life. I thought it would be David but it's looking more unlikely by the day.'

'You haven't heard from him?'

'No.' She looked up at Dorothy, her eyes darkened with pain. 'Have you?' Dorothy shook her head. Carrie sighed and leant back on the settee. 'I know I must do the right thing, not just for me and Johan, but for John too. But is it right to tell Johan about John just because Arnold's threatening me? Is it the right reason?'

Dorothy shrugged and they both looked to the door when they heard a wail from the nursery. 'I'm not sure the reason matters. Johan Stern is John's father. The poor man is going through hell with the impending loss of his baby son. And let's face it, darling, he doesn't need to tell his wife about John. Or about you for that matter.' Carrie looked astonished and Dorothy put a hand on her shoulder. 'Don't look like that. You know as well as I do that sort of thing happens all the time. I think you should tell him. The time for secrets has gone, and really I think you'll feel better after you've told him no matter what the consequences are. It will protect John and shoot down Arnold Bateman's biggest threat against you in flames.'

'It might make me feel better, but will it make him feel better?' Dorothy shrugged. 'Would you? Tell Johan, I mean.'

'Definitely, and if I don't go to the nursery soon, the twins will begin to wail even louder. It seems it's dinner time. Again.'

They hugged and Dorothy walked her to the door. 'It's the right thing to do, Carrie, but I think you must choose your moment, and really it's your decision no matter what I or anyone else thinks. John's safety is the most important thing, and if telling Johan Stern he's John's father keeps your son from Bateman's clutches, I'm not sure you have a choice.'



WHEN CARRIE RETURNED to Nightingale Lane that afternoon she was met at the door by a troubled looking Tommy.

'Tommy? What's happened?' She took off her hat and coat and hung them on the stand in the hall.

'It's Pearl. She says she doesn't feel very well.'

'Why? What's wrong?'

Tommy frowned and shook his head. 'I don't know. I'm new to all of this. I don't know what to do. I'm worried that the pregnancy has got too much for her after the explosion and her injuries. I'm beginning to wish we'd waited. It wasn't planned, Carrie. We didn't make a decision to start a family or anything like that. It just happened.'

Carrie made her way to the front sitting room which Pearl and Tommy had made their home. 'It mostly does just happen.' She gave a benign smile of sympathy, remembering the time when it "just happened" to her. 'Would you like me to go in and see her?'

Tommy nodded and sighed with relief. Carrie knocked gently on the door and was surprised to hear Pearl's voice, much weaker than the day before. 'Come in.' The room was in semi-darkness, gloomy as the brightness of the afternoon drew in, made even darker by the curtains closed against the outside.

'Pearl?'

Pearl was in bed, her face sallow against the white pillowcase. 'Oh, Carrie, I feel so rough.'

Carrie went across the room and sat on the side of the bed, reaching for Pearl's hand. 'What's wrong, Pearl? You were so good yesterday. So happy.'

'I know, I felt good then, but not today. I've got a really bad stomach-ache, well, just below my ribs.' She put a hand to her side. 'And my heads pounding and I'm sore...down there,' she said, her eyes going to the lower part of Carrie's body.

'Have you been sick?'

'No, but I feel dizzy. I don't want to feel like this. I've only got a few weeks to go. I thought I'd got over the worst of it, y'know, the sickness and everything.'

Carrie put her palm against Pearl's forehead. 'You're very warm, Pearl. You've got a high temperature. Maybe it's the flu.'

Pearl looked stricken. 'Oh, my God, don't say that. They might have to take me out of here in a coffin. You know what the flu's doing to people. They said it could get really bad.'

Carrie swallowed, wishing she hadn't mentioned the flu. The virus had been sweeping across Europe and seemed to be getting worse by the week. Some of the newspapers were leading with it and everyone had been talking about it, saying it could take as many off as the war, as if they didn't have enough to worry about. 'They won't be carrying you anywhere, but I think we should call the doctor.'

'Oh, Carrie, no, please. I don't want to leave here. I'll be alright, it's probably just a chill.'

'It's just to be on the safe side. Better that than to let it get worse. At least we'll know what it is. Hopefully, the doctor will give you something to take away the pain. It's Christmas soon. You want to be well for that, don't you? Only three weeks to go.'

'Course I do.'

'Well, there you are then. I'll get Tommy to go round to the doctors. He can make sure he comes here and we can get the mystery cleared up. You'll be fine, Pearl.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'



THE DOCTOR DIAGNOSED toxæmia. Pearl's blood pressure was too high, and when protein was found in her urine she was admitted to hospital. Tommy stayed by her bedside until he was told to go home because there was nothing he could do to make it easier for Pearl.

'What will happen?' he asked the Sister who was looking after the ward.

The nurse took him to one side out of Pearl's hearing. 'The doctor may want to deliver the baby, Mr. Dobbs,' she said.

Tommy stared at her. 'What? But she's only about thirty-three weeks gone. Surely the baby won't survive.'

The nurse looked grave but tried to be reassuring which did nothing to increase Tommy's confidence. 'Some babies do survive and if the doctor decides it's safer for Mrs. Dobbs to deliver early then I think you should be willing to take his advice. Pre-eclampsia can be dangerous. We want to reduce the risk of Mrs Dobbs having fits which can happen with the condition she has if it's allowed to continue. They could have a lasting effect on her.'

'Pre-eclampsia? The doctor said toxæmia.'

‘Yes, its medically termed pre-eclampsia now.’

‘Is it common?’

‘It can be, but obviously the severity differs from mother to mother.’ Tommy looked so crestfallen the nurse took pity on him. ‘Try not to worry, Mr. Dobbs. Everything will be done to make sure your wife and child get the best treatment.’

‘If the baby is started early will Pearl deliver naturally?’

The nurse put a hand on his forearm. ‘That was always in doubt, Mr. Dobbs, because of your wife’s previous injuries. Delivering a baby naturally is awfully hard work. It’s why it’s called labour. It will take it out of her. She will need every ounce of strength to push baby out and with her injuries sustained previously in the explosion I think the most likely course will be a Caesarean section undertaken by a surgeon. Mrs Dobbs needs her strength to get better, doesn’t she?’

‘An operation?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. We have a good team here. She’s in good hands.’

‘But an operation. It’s not what she wants. It’s not what I want. She’s already been through so much. How will her body stand up to an operation?’

The nurse nodded and fixed Tommy with a stare, hoping he would understand how serious things were. ‘The thing is, if we leave Pearl for too long she might not get the chance to tell us what she wants. This isn’t ideal, not the outcome either of you would have wanted, but in medicine we must deal with what we have. When all else fails we try to provide solutions and we want to save your wife’s life, and that of your baby. There are no guarantees, Mr. Dobbs. There are never guarantees, particularly with surgery. Even with a simple tonsillectomy there are risks because as with any operation nothing is simple, and nothing is without risk.’

Tommy rubbed his eyes with the finger and thumb of his right hand which shook with tiredness as he lowered it. ‘Go home,’ said the Sister. ‘Go home and get some rest. If there’s any change we’ll get a message to you, but if Mrs. Dobbs condition doesn’t improve your baby will be delivered tomorrow.’

That night, when he’d returned from the hospital and had used the rear entrance into the house so he wouldn’t meet anyone and have to explain things, Tommy sat in his and Pearl’s bed sitting

room, the one they had made into a home, nursing a glass of whiskey as he stared into the fire. Around him was the evidence of the expectation of a new baby; a swinging crib, a table stacked with baby-powder, lotions and soaps, and a stack of pristine white towelling nappies hemmed with the tiniest stitches by Pearl’s own hand. Anger ran through him when he thought of everything he and Pearl, and his sister, Carrie had been through. Nothing had come easy to them,

they'd fought for everything they had, yet here they were, a threat hanging over Pearl's life again, and of the infant she carried, their baby, their child, their first born. He brooded silently, his thoughts careering from one thing to another. Now it was Arthur and Florrie he could see in his mind's eye, the parents he had looked up to in his youth, but felt strongly now, and depressingly so, were two people who had let him down, let them all down in a way, Florrie because she was so hard-hearted, and Arthur because of his weakness and unwillingness to stand up to Florrie even though he knew she was wrong in just about every bigoted opinion she held.

He remembered what Florrie had said about Pearl years ago, that she was scum because her Dad had left them, when Pearl had been a wee thing, to set up home with a tart who plied her trade in all the pubs in Whitechapel, and was still doing so by all accounts. He shook his head, wondering at how Florrie could now, with any real conviction, reconcile that opinion with the fact that Elsie, Florrie's own daughter was doing exactly the same thing, and she with a nipper too, Rose, whom they never laid eyes on and knew nothing about.

He bit his lip, feeling guilty that he hadn't made more of an effort to find out how little Rose was and how she was living, to try and help her in some way. She was still a baby after all, and it wasn't her fault that Elsie had chosen the path she was now on. He wondered why Florrie and Arthur hadn't made more of an effort to find the child and offer some support. Then something occurred to him. Florrie and Arthur had two grandchildren, and if the good Lord saw fit to ensure his and Pearl's baby survived, they would have three, three little mites who would have benefitted from having loving grandparents, not one of which they ever saw, because he was certain Florrie wouldn't want to see his child because she hated Pearl, looked down on her...and wouldn't allow Arthur to make up his own mind to see the child either. He shook his head again and frowned, unable to comprehend how his parents could be content in the knowledge that they would be grandparents to three children with whom they had no relationship and didn't attempt to seek any contact.

He lifted the glass to his lips and drank deeply, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, then put his glass on the little occasional table by his elbow and got down on his knees, putting his hands together and closing his eyes like he used to when he was a boy; forced to go to Sunday school because Florrie said only urchins, ragamuffins and tricksters didn't attend Sunday school, and it was just as well because God wouldn't have wanted the dirty little buggers in his lovely church anyway because they reeked of how they were brought up and their language was as foul as the shit in the gutters.

'Dear, God,' he said aloud. 'I never pray and I'm sorry for that. I'm

sorry for that now because you're all I've got left. Please, God, don't let me become like Florrie, bitter, and mean and liking no one. And don't let me be like my father, the Dad I wanted to be like when I was a boy because I admired him, because he worked hard and seemingly put his family first. Or did he do what he did simply because he was frightened of Florrie's sharp tongue?

Don't let me be weak like that, a pale version of the man I always wanted to be. I know I shouldn't care what they think of Pearl but I do care. I care because she doesn't deserve to be spoken about like that. She deserves only the best of everything and I will do everything I can to give it to her.'

Tears ran down Tommy's cheeks, copious and unchecked as though he was unaware they were there.

'And most of all, dear God, keep my lovely Pearl and our little one safe. Please, please don't let them die because if they do so will I. I'll make sure of it because I'll have nothing left to live for. There will be no point to anything and I don't want to carry on like that. We're good people, Pearl and me, and we'll raise our child to be good too. Please save them, Lord. Please let them live and I promise I will take care of all of them, Carrie, John, little Rose, and Pearl and our little one. I'll go to church and raise our baby in your eyes. And when I've found Rose I'll take her on too. You have my promise, Lord. I will keep them safe, all of them, and I won't let anything or anyone harm a hair on their heads. I'll be their protector no matter what. I love them all so dearly, and if you're the God I think you are, I think you do too. Amen.'



CARRIE STOOD SILENTLY in the hall, ramrod straight ready for battle, her hands clutching her carpet bag, her fingers pressed so tightly against the wooden handles her knuckles were almost white. Tommy left the bed-sitting room and closed the door, his face pale, his eyes red-rimmed with exhaustion. He glanced up when he sensed he was not alone in the hall.

'Carrie?' He frowned when he saw her.

'I'm coming with you.'

He shook his head and made for the front door. 'No, Carrie, you can't...'

She put her hand on his arm and grabbed his sleeve. 'I promised her, Tommy. I promised her everything would be alright. When I made that promise I didn't know...I didn't know what was happening to her. I shouldn't have said everything would be alright because how could I know it would be?' She released his arm, her eyes awash with

tears. 'That's me all over, isn't it? You said I was an optimist and I suppose I am, but I got it wrong, didn't I? My optimism was wrong this time.'

Tommy leant against the wall as if all the fight had gone out of him. 'You weren't to know, Sis. Sometimes we say things just because we want them to be right. We think if we say them enough times they'll come true. You weren't to know how ill she was. It came on so suddenly.'

'What did they say? The doctors? Yesterday?'

'They might have to deliver the baby today.'

Carrie's eyes widened. 'What? But she's weeks away from her time.'

Tommy sighed. 'I know, but they said it's the only way to stop what's happening to her.'

'Let me come. Please. I want to be there for you and Pearl.' She stared at him her eyes pleading with him. 'Let's face it, Tommy, we're all we've got. We have to look out for one another, don't we? Who else will?'

His thoughts went to his prayer, promising that he would take care of them all if only He would save Pearl and the baby, and nodded his head in agreement.



HER FACE WAS THE COLOUR of muslin, her lips so pale they could barely be seen. Tommy and Carrie quietly approached her bed, neither saying a word. Carrie looked up at him, wondering if he saw what she saw, but his eyes didn't waver from Pearl, her breathing so shallow it was as if she had no breath at all. Carrie wondered if they were too late, that Pearl had left them and no one had noticed, but then her eyelids fluttered and Carrie's heart slowed, and she released the breath she'd been holding since they'd entered the ward.

After a few moments, a nurse came towards them, her starched apron rustling in the heavy silence that surrounded them.

'Mr Dobbs?' Tommy nodded. 'We're taking her down to theatre in about half an hour. The baby will be delivered as planned by Dr. Kingston. He's an excellent surgeon.'

'Does she know?' he asked the nurse. 'Did someone tell her before...before she went to sleep what was going to happen?'

The nurse nodded. 'She knows, Mr. Dobbs. Dr. Kingston spoke to her himself. We hope the baby's delivery will release your wife from danger.'

'Will the baby...will it be alright?' Tommy's voice broke with emotion and Carrie's heart lurched for him. She was so scared, so

frightened of what might happen to Pearl and the baby. She could only imagine what he was going through. He's too young, she thought, much too young to go through something like this. How will he cope if things go wrong.

'Dr. Kingston will do everything he can to save both of them. There is every chance they will both survive. This is not the first surgery he has carried out on a mother suffering in the same way as your wife.' Neither Tommy nor Carrie wanted to ask how many of them survived. They stayed quiet.

They waited for news, sitting on hard wooden chairs in the corridor, silent, knowing that the next few hours could change the course of both their lives. Pearl was an important part of their family, had been like a loving sister to Carrie, and as Tommy's wife was the sisterly companion she'd always longed for. They had shared everything; Pearl was the first person apart from Tommy Carrie had told about her pregnancy with John. She was the only person she could trust, and trust her she did, knowing Pearl would resolutely be in her corner no matter what happened, or what anyone said about her and what she'd done.

Tommy couldn't imagine life without Pearl. They had been married such a short time but he had known her for much longer, and she had always been the one he'd admired from afar. Her winning smile and copper-coloured hair falling down her back in waves made her stand out, and he knew when William was so sadly killed in action someone would snap her up. When she'd finally agreed to marry him he considered that he had won the top prize, hardly able to believe she had fallen for a quiet man like him, when so many others had more to say and perhaps more to offer, and there was no one to match up to her. Her kindness and stoic sense of humour was well-known to everyone, but only he knew the loving warmth, the listening ear, the absolute belief that she gave him without question or condition. She was his best friend, the best he had ever had, his lover and his soulmate. To lose her was unthinkable, no, he would not think it, would not contemplate a life without his beloved Pearl.

When she was injured in the explosion he had acknowledged how fortunate they'd been that she'd survived. She had already suffered so much; sometimes the pain in her back was almost too much for her to bear, and he would spend hours rubbing her muscles and making warm compresses to ease the pain, but she never complained, would just say, 'Think how lucky we are, Tommy, that we still have each other when so many don't after what happened at Silver Town. We're the lucky ones.' She had been the one who kept them going, and he knew if the boot was on the other foot she would never stop believing in him, never doubt that he would pull through, and he must believe

the same of her.

He was tired, so very tired; he hadn't slept a wink the previous night, yet his senses were on red alert. He watched the doors with an eagle eye; each time a nurse or doctor or patient came through he flinched, thinking it was someone coming to tell him about Pearl. Then the moment came, too soon because now he would know, yet not soon enough because the wait had been too long.

'Mr. Dobbs?'

Tommy stood, awkward, not knowing how to behave. He wanted to grab the doctor by the front of his coat and beg him for good news of Pearl, but his natural reticence prevented it. He took a breath. 'Yes, I'm Tommy Dobbs.'

'Dr Kingston.' The doctor held out a hand towards him. Tommy took it shyly, and they shook hands. 'Congratulations, Mr. Dobbs. You have a baby girl.'

Tommy's eyes widened and he glanced down at Carrie, who wasn't sure if it was too soon or even appropriate to smile and congratulate him.

'And Pearl?' asked Tommy. 'Is Pearl alright?'

'At present. Mrs Dobbs has shown great fortitude. She is clearly stronger than she looks. The surgery went well, and at the moment mother and baby are satisfactory. Your child will be cared for, here at the hospital, until she has gained the weight she requires and we can be confident that she will survive in the outside world. Please understand there are never guarantees with this kind of surgery. We can only do our best, the rest is up to your wife and child.'

'Is Pearl awake?' Carrie asked.

Dr Kingston shook his head. 'She will wake in an hour or so. The condition she experienced before surgery should now be relieved, but there may be some after-effects from which she'll need time to recover. We will keep her here for ten days, longer if we think it's necessary, but I'm sure you would like her home for your Christmas celebrations.'

'Could it be possible?' Tommy asked him.

'I understand your wife and Mrs Bateman care for convalescing soldiers.'

Carrie nodded. 'We provide care for them after their hospital treatment. It gives them some recuperation before they go home or back to the front. Pearl will be safe with us and well looked after. We know how to take care of those in need.'

Dr Kingston nodded. 'I think we can safely say Mrs Dobbs will be home for Christmas, but it must be bed rest for her for at least two weeks after discharge. On no account must she attempt to do anything too soon and even then only light duties, no lifting or carrying. It

could take her months to recover completely.'

Tommy grabbed his hand again and began pumping it up and down, thrilled that there was some good news when he had imagined in his darkest moments that it would be so bad.

'Thank you, doctor. Thank you so much. I thought I'd lost her...and our baby. I can't wait to see them.' Tommy turned to Carrie uncertainly, and then back to the doctor. 'The baby? Where is she?'

'She is with our nurses who give special care. I rather think she's already a favourite because she is so doll-like.'

'Can I see her?'

'Of course, but she's in a confined ward and we advise that you don't hold her. She's receiving specialist treatment and it's imperative we keep contact to a minimum to allow her immune system to develop before she encounters anything we would find normal. I'll point you in the right direction.'

Carrie grabbed Tommy's hand and he glanced at her. She could feel him shaking so she squeezed his hand and smiled.

'You're about to meet your daughter, Tommy.' Tommy nodded and she saw him swallow nervously. 'It'll be alright,' she whispered. He grinned at her and she grinned back. 'There I go again, ever the optimist.'



DR KINGSTON LED THEM through a tangle of corridors before stopping in front of a window. Tommy and Carrie stood next to him and peered into the room. A masked nurse sat holding a tiny bundle wrapped in a fleecy sheet, a little mop of golden hair at the top. The nurse looked up and smiled, then turned on the chair so that Tommy and Carrie could look into the baby's face. Carrie grabbed his arm.

'Oh, Tommy, look. She's a miniature Pearl.' He nodded, lost for words, unable to speak as tears ran down his cheeks. 'She's beautiful.'

Tommy cleared his throat, emotion taking his voice from him. 'Yeah, she is. She's beautiful, just like her mum.'

'Will she be alright, Dr. Kingston,' Carrie asked him. 'She looks so tiny.'

'She has a long way to go, but she's not the smallest baby we've delivered in this hospital. She's in the best place. She has a good chance.'

'And Pearl?'

'Mrs Dobbs needs to rest, I cannot stress that enough. Her recovery is dependent on her body regaining its former strength. She needs sleep, rest, and nourishing food. More than that, well, as I said before it's rather up to her although I'm under the impression she's a fighter.'

‘She’s had to be,’ said Carrie. ‘She’s been through so much since the war began. She’s had her own war to fight, particularly after the explosion at the munitions factory.’

He nodded. ‘Yes, we had many of the casualties here. She, and you, Mr Dobbs,’ he glanced at Tommy, ‘were fortunate to survive. There were seventy-nine deaths and hundreds of injuries. It was as though the front in France had been brought to our doorstep at Poplar.’

He bade them goodbye, and Tommy and Carrie returned to the front hall where they asked to be informed when Pearl woke from her operation.

‘What a day,’ said Tommy as he sat on one of the chairs pushed against the wall. ‘I can’t believe I’m a dad. I just didn’t think it would be like this. It’s nothing like I’d pictured in my mind, I can tell you.’

Carrie shook her head. ‘No, I’m not surprised.’ She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Praying. Praying that from now on we’re left to get on with things, that Pearl...and little Pearl,’ Tommy chuckled, ‘or whatever you decide to call her will fight on and come home to us where they should be. I want to take care of them, make them strong and ready for you to live together as a family. It’s all I want right now.’

‘Really, Carrie? All you want? I’d have thought there were other things for you to want. You’ve had your own battles to fight.’

She lifted her hand as though batting away a fly. ‘They can wait. They were there yesterday, they’re there today, and no doubt they’ll be there tomorrow. What can I do about it?’

Tommy smiled. ‘Fall for different men?’

She grinned and batted him affectionately with the back of her hand. ‘I hardly fell for Bateman, although he could have been my downfall if I’d let him be.’

‘Well, you know what they say, Carrie.’

She glanced up at him and smiled. ‘What’s that?’

‘Everything will be alright.’



TEN DAYS LATER PEARL returned home to Nightingale Lane in an ambulance, a much quieter home-coming than after the explosion in Silver Town. She was carried into the bed-sitting room by two ambulance men and accompanied by a nurse who checked the room before she would even allow Pearl to disembark from the ambulance. Clearly it came up to scratch, as she ushered the two men through the front door carrying Pearl between them. Tommy, Carrie, and Ida stood by wringing their hands, feeling like spare parts. The nurse gave

Carrie Pearl's hospital discharge papers and medicines with a repeat of the instructions that Pearl should do nothing for a fortnight and only when given the all-clear to leave her bed by a nurse who would visit her daily.

'What about food? Is there anything special I should give her?'

'Just as nutritious as you can. I know it's difficult in these trying times, but hot soups, broths, milk, and cream if you can get it. Have you thought about planting your own vegetables? Many are doing so now, and you have lots of room out there.' Carrie looked out into the garden and wished she'd thought of it sooner.' It would ensure a good supply of vegetables not just for you but for the soldiers you take care of. You could outwit the shortages, Mrs Bateman.' Carrie nodded. It was a good idea. She had the manpower and Ida could direct them to the things they needed. 'And a few chickens perhaps. Had you thought of it?'

'I hadn't but thank you for giving me the idea. It's something we'll definitely look at, and it would be such a good thing to do. When Pearl is better, we can perhaps give her the job of overseeing it. She's very organised and it's something she can begin gradually. What do you think, Tommy?'

Tommy nodded enthusiastically. 'Yeah, it'll give us something to talk about while she's recuperating. I think she'll love the challenge and she'll want the little one to help when she's old enough. Something for us both to look forward to.'



EVERY MORNING THE HOUSEHOLD kept to a routine; an early start to the day, the drawing of curtains to let in whatever light there was in the strange greyish hue tinged with a wintery light that meant Christmas was close. Pearl remained quiet, uncomplaining, constantly tired, but day by day a touch of pink returned to her cheeks. Her hair lost its dull colour and began to gleam like copper again. Tommy lost his haggard, worried look and became more animated as Pearl gradually regained her strength. Every evening he went to the hospital to visit the baby, reporting back to Pearl about her progress, then repeating it three times more, to Carrie and Ida, the Belgian families they'd become so close to, and the young soldiers in their care.

'Have you chosen a name yet?' Carrie asked Pearl one evening when Tommy had gone to the hospital. 'Or are you keeping it a secret?'

Pearl smiled. 'We like Eliza,' she said.

Carrie flushed and looked delighted. 'Oh, that's sort of one of my names.'

‘Yes, Carrie, we know.’ She shook her head in mock humour. ‘It’s one of the reasons we chose it, and also because we love it. It’s such a beautiful name, she’ll be Elizabeth on her birth certificate, but we both love Eliza and we think it will suit her.’

‘You got to see her didn’t you, before you left the hospital?’

‘Yes, I saw her. They took me in my wheelchair so I could watch her through the window being fed and changed. It took all my strength to stop from wheeling myself right in there and taking her in my arms. I just wanted to hold her, Carrie, to hold her and love her like a real mum.’

Carrie took her hand and held it tight. ‘Oh, Pearl, you are a real mum. Look what you went through to have her. And as soon as she’s home you’ll be able to bond with her and do everything for her.’ Pearl looked away, her face etched with worry. ‘What is it, Pearl? What’s worrying you?’

‘What if I’m not strong enough to look after her, Carrie? Taking care of a baby is hard work isn’t it? Dorothy said she hadn’t realised how much work it took, especially after a bad night. Both of hers get colic after their last feed and she says some mornings she’s dead on her feet. How will I cope?’

‘You’ll cope because you love Eliza. And yes, it’s not easy, I won’t pretend. Having a new-born is hard because it’s all new, but you’ll be fine.’

‘I’m sorry. I feel terrible worrying like this. And I don’t want to upset Tommy. Look what you went through. You had John on an old ship with no midwife to look after you, then had to get used to a new country, and you were with Bateman of all people who couldn’t have given a sod about you. I don’t remember you moaning about it.’

Carrie laughed. ‘I did nothing but moan about it, it’s just that you weren’t in Secunderabad when I was doing my moaning. Ask Gita...and Dorothy. I moaned to them. And we’re allowed to moan. I wanted John more than anything, love him more than life itself, but sometimes it was very hard. If he had the wind that wouldn’t come up I would sit on the end of the bed trying to burp him for what seemed like hours. It probably wasn’t, but it felt like it, and in the morning I looked like I’d been pulled through a hedge backwards. I know you don’t want to hear this, but I hope you’ll let me and Tommy help. He wants nothing more than to get Eliza home so you can be a family. He wants to help, sweetheart and I think you should let him. It doesn’t make you less of a mum, just a very caring one.’ Pearl nodded, looking happier. ‘And don’t forget, you’ve been through a difficult time, one that no mother-to-be would want to face. The most important thing right now is for you to be stronger. You feel better, don’t you?’ Pearl nodded. ‘By the time Eliza comes home you’ll be ready to be her

mum, believe me.'

Just then the door swung open and Tommy came in, a huge grin animating his face.

'She's doing so well, Pearl. She's feeding well and put on another ounce. In a few days, when you're stronger, I'll hire a car and take you to see her. She needs to see her mum.' He went across to the bed and wrapped his arms around Pearl who rested her head against his chest. Carrie left them then, praying it wasn't too early for her to expect a happy outcome for them. She knew the dangers that lurked around a new baby, particularly one of such low birth weight. The nurse who was attending Pearl had told Carrie what could happen to a sickly baby who hadn't gone full-term.

'She's doing well, though,' she'd said to Carrie. 'That little mite must have got some strength from somewhere. Either that or someone up there is looking out for them both.' She'd raised her chin and Carrie had looked up to the heavens, knowing she wouldn't see anything but sky and a few clouds scudding by, but wondering if the love William had had for Pearl before he was killed was seeing her and Eliza through. Whatever it was she hoped it would continue. Pearl and Eliza needed all the help they could get.



Chapter 54



IT WAS THE 20th December. Pearl had continued to make good progress although slept much of the time which was worrying her husband. Every day he would come home with something new for Christmas, a gaudy bauble he'd found on the market, a little mug with Father Christmas on for Eliza when she knew what Christmas meant, a pebble picked up from the detritus at Silver Town on which someone had painted a Christmas scene.

'To bring us luck,' he'd said. 'Something beautiful from something devastating.' Pearl would look at the gifts lovingly and give Tommy a thank you kiss, then settle back against her pillows, content to close her eyes and drift off again.

'It's alright for her to sleep,' said Ida. 'It's when the body mends when we're sleeping. We know that, don't we, from the boys. They're always much better when they've made up for the sleep they lost in them damn trenches.' She sighed and threw a huge lump of dough down onto the floured table, ready for kneading. 'Reckon we've been in our own trench what with everything what's happened,' she muttered to herself as much as anyone. 'Give her time. I've got faith in the body doing what it needs.'

Tommy took his breakfast plate over to the window and dropped it into the suds in the butler sink.

'Yeah, you're right, Ida. I know I worry too much but I can't help it. What with Pearl recovering here and then little Eliza in hospital. I don't know who to worry for most.'

'D'you know what, Tommy?' Ida said as she gave the dough a thump. 'I've always thought that all the worrying in the world don't ever change anything. You're doing yourself no favours, believe me. You should be looking after yourself too, my lad, cause when that baby comes home you'll be swept off your feet with sleepless nights, nappies, feeds, and the rest. Let Pearl do what she needs to do and that's sleep. If I know her at all she'll be wanting to be hands on with Eliza so she's doing the right thing getting her rest now.'

She bobbed her head to Tommy as if to say, there, don't argue

with me and he ran across the kitchen and put his arms around her, pushing his face into her neck. She screamed and laughed her head off as he tickled her around the middle.

‘Get off, Tommy, you’re a bad ‘un, you really are,’ she said, still laughing and straightening her apron then tucking her stray grey hair under her cap.

‘You love it really, and you’re the only one I can do that to, Ida. I wouldn’t dream of mucking about with anyone else. You’re more of a mum to me than Florrie ever was. And if I did that to her she’d go mad.’

‘Well, she’s the one who’s missed out. You’ve got to have a laugh sometimes, haven’t you, otherwise we’d all go demented. There’s enough going on in the world that’s difficult and hard to live with. Sometimes you’ve just got to let go a bit.’

‘Definitely. Any of those buns going you made this morning?’

Her mouth dropped open. ‘You’ve just had your breakfast, Tommy Dobbs. You don’t need no buns.’

‘Aw, go on Ida. I’m always hungry, you know that.’

She reached up to the top shelf of the dresser and brought down a cake tin, opening it with a pop. She brought out two buns, thick with confectioner’s sugar, and handed them to him.

‘Now go on with you or you’ll be late for work. And don’t be telling Joshka and the others what I’ve just given you or they’ll be down here lookin’ for them as well. I’ll have none left for tea.’

Tommy chuckled and stood in the hall waiting for the others to join him as he took a bite out of one of the buns. Joshka, Gregor and Asher joined him and he swiftly stuffed the remains of it into his mouth. He didn’t want Ida’s wrath to come down on him; she was capable of giving him a clip round the ear, no matter how old he got.

The men left the house together, laughing and joking as they made their way down Nightingale Lane to the tram stop for the early morning tram which would take them to Silver Street to continue the renovations and rebuilding after the explosion at the munitions factory. When they got to the end of the road Tommy noticed a group of men hanging about on the corner. They were all smartly dressed, yet somehow cocky in their manner, their hats pushed to the backs of their head, their jackets open, three with their hands in their pockets. Two were smoking. In the centre of the five men was Arnold Bateman. Tommy narrowed his eyes and watched him as he spoke quietly to the other men and he wondered if Arnold had recognised him.

His step faltered. Was Arnold planning to pay Carrie a visit? All the able men had left the house and were waiting at the tram stop. Is this what Arnold was watching for, for the men to leave until there were only women and wounded soldiers at the house, those he could bully?

And what about the others? Were they there as muscle because he planned to push his way in, just as he, Carrie and Ida had discussed?

He took a deep breath. If he didn't go to Silver Town he would lose a days' wages and maybe even his job. It was something he couldn't risk, especially now when they needed every penny. If he had to go home and tell Pearl his job had gone it would just be something else for her to worry about. He looked to the end of Albany Street and saw the tram in the distance as it rumbled towards them. He knew he had a decision to make. Carrie would tell him to go to work because his job was at risk if he didn't. Ida too. And he and Pearl needed the money for Eliza, for when she came home. If he lost his job it would be a disaster and they'd had enough of those to last them a lifetime. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that Arnold was there; maybe one of his army pals lived close by.

He continued to watch the men as the tram pulled up at the stop. Joshka, Gregor and Asher got on and Tommy held back.

'Tommy?' cried Joshka. 'You need to hurry, man. You'll make us late. You know what the boss is like.'

Tommy nodded and stepped up to where the conductor was waiting on the metal platform. 'Yeah, I'm here,' he said. As the tram continued down the street Tommy grabbed a strap that hung from the roof of the tram and peered out of the window, his eyes on Arnold and the group of men as they crossed Albany Street and went into a café on the other side of the road serving cheap breakfasts to soldiers back in London on leave. Tommy knew this should have made him feel better but it didn't. He wanted to warn Carrie that he had seen Arnold Bateman near the house, but there was no way he could, and he made up his mind to try and leave Silver Town earlier than usual that evening to make sure everyone at the house was safe.



ARNOLD STOOD ON THE corner where he had arranged to meet the soldiers from his unit who were on leave for a few days. They were the lucky ones, the ones who had made it through the gunfire, the carnage, and the inevitable deaths of some of their mates. It made Arnold feel blessed, as though he and those other survivors were special, that for some reason they deserved to survive more than those who hadn't. Why else would they have made it through?

The café on Albany Street made the best breakfasts around, and they were offering soldiers a chunk off the bill as a thank you for fighting for their country. When he'd got his friends together to have breakfast in Albany Street he thought he could kill two birds with one stone, and he had chuckled at the analogy. He didn't want to kill

Carrie Dobbs, although he had felt like it sometimes when they were in Secunderabad, and recently, when she'd spoken to him like he was a no one, a piece of dirt that she kept on the doorstep until she could clean it off. He hated her confidence in herself, the fact that she always seemed to have an answer for everything he said to her. Florrie Dobbs had led him to believe she was a young, quiet, impressionable girl who had got herself into trouble because she was a bit soft and naive and needed a means of leaving Whitechapel to get away from the wagging tongues who would make the family's life a misery. He'd realised pretty early on that this was not what he'd got when he agreed to pay for her hand in marriage so he could be seen by his superiors as a steadying influence; that Carrie was a girl with her own mind and a strength of character that would see her through the extremes of living in a country like India. And she had, better than he had in some ways.

What he hadn't realised until it was too late was that she had a talent for attracting the "right kind" of people, people he considered would have been useful to him in his ambitions to further his career and his standing in society, and he'd regretted his treatment of her, not because he didn't think she deserved such censure, she was a bloody nuisance most of the time and the slaps he gave her were justified, but because the connections she'd made would have been beneficial to him.

Her friendship with Dorothy Tremaine had angered him. Carrie had been a scullery maid in the kind of house that Dorothy would have simply visited and been shown hospitality, then returned, without giving Carrie a second look, to her palatial surroundings in Victoria Square where she now lived. He knew this because unknown to Carrie he'd followed her there when she'd visited Dorothy. He also knew Carrie had met with Johan Stern at a teashop on the return journey after one of her visits. He had wondered about this. Perhaps Carrie had started up her relationship with Johan Stern again, a man who was married to someone else with a child between them. So typical of her to be complicit in such an arrangement. Did she not have such an arrangement with David Lawrence when they were in Secunderabad, the captain he'd once looked up to but now disliked with a passion that verged on uncontrollable hatred? And did Stern know that Carrie's child was his? He doubted it. Not once had she mentioned Johan Stern's name when they were in Secunderabad, although at the time it suited him for everyone to know that he, Arnold, wasn't the father. He wanted his fellow soldiers and their wives to know what kind of girl she was so if things didn't work out he could blame her, but she had managed to turn things her way. He resented it more than she knew, but eventually she would know. He

had paid good money for her and as far as he was concerned hadn't had his money's worth. She owed him as did her mother. Carrie was still his wife and what was hers was his. It was the law.

He felt someone's eyes on him and glanced up as he took a long pull on his cigarette. Across the road was a group of men, Belgians he guessed. They were the bastards who were taking work from their men. There wasn't much to be had as it was for those who were unable to go to the front, and along they came and took the jobs from underneath the feet of honest working men who were either injured or had conditions that prevented them from fighting for their country. It was diabolical. He knew they were refugees. He'd seen first-hand what the Bosch had done to them, to their homes and to the women, but why did our men have to pay. He knew men who could barely put food on the table because work was so hit and miss, yet here it was, the country he was fighting for handing out paid work to foreigners.

He squinted across the road and saw that the group of men wasn't made up entirely of Belgian refugees. He recognised Tommy Dobbs instantly. Arnold smirked to himself. So...the house was a house full of women today was it? Maybe this would be a good day to pay Carrie Dobbs another visit as long as that battle-axe of a cook didn't make her presence felt. He'd already warned Carrie what he would do if she didn't play ball. And he'd already prepared the groundwork. Betty Baker, if that was her real name, a woman he had met in The Lamb, the public house at the end of his street, had already agreed to play the part of his girl if push came to shove. He'd had to pay her. She'd giggled saying that it was the most money she'd ever earned standing upright, which he'd ignored with disgust, turning his nose up as if there was a nasty smell under it. God, women were revolting. He even deplored his own mother who had proved she was no better than she should be. He'd revered his father who had shown Dolores who was boss, kept her in her place, and he'd made sure he'd followed in his father's footsteps and treated her the same way. That's the thing with women, you had to let them know who you were and what you thought of them. He always made sure he did.

He watched as the tram approached the tram stop. The Belgians couldn't wait to hop on and earn their money, but Tommy Dobbs seemed to be holding back. Arnold wondered why that was. Tommy was waiting for something, that was clear. Had he seen Arnold? One of the refugees called out to him to get on the tram and he'd lifted his chin and hesitated as though not sure what to do and then got on, not like the others of course; he couldn't move like the others because of his limp. How he'd managed to find a wife was beyond Arnold, but then it was only Pearl. She was a no one, and now she was in a wheelchair her chances were almost nil. She was probably grateful to

him that he'd taken her on.

As the tram passed him and his mates as they made their way to the café in Albany Street he saw Tommy Dobbs strap hanging in the centre aisle of the tram, watching him out of the window until the tram turned the corner and he was out of sight. There was nothing he could do. He was on a tram leaving Nightingale Lane, and if Arnold was correct, on his way to Silver Town, which left the field clear for Arnold should he decide to go to number ninety-nine.

In the café he laughed at his mates lurid anecdotes, usually at the expense of some woman or other, only half listening. As he ate his breakfast his mind was on his next move to convince Carrie that she should give him what he deserved and that the alternative was he would simply take it. He fancied himself as the owner of 99 Nightingale Lane, an imposing house he was certain befitted his recent promotion. He was fairly sure there was nothing she could do to stop him. Only that little mistake with the blond soldier he'd taken a fancy to stood in his way. Yes, that incident had left him feeling undermined. If that hadn't happened he would have been totally confident that the way was clear for him to walk in and take what was owed to him, but he knew if Carrie used it against him it would cause trouble for him, which was why he had secured the help of Betty Baker. He needed to dispute anything Carrie accused him of with confidence and authority, and he could only do that with a woman in tow to prove that her accusations were ridiculous and had no foundation. Had he known that Carrie had planned to return earlier than expected the day she and Gita had gone to James Street in Secunderabad he would have taken the young man to a hotel as he had with his previous liaisons, but he had been sure he would be safe, an error on his part which he hadn't repeated.

He squirmed in his seat at the thought of the look on Carrie's face when she had walked into the bedroom of their bungalow on the mofussil in Secunderabad, and felt sick at heart. The breakfast he'd eaten had been swimming in grease and the bacon undercooked, and the more he thought of the day Carrie had found him out, the worse he felt. His stomach rolled and dipped and he rushed past the counter to the outhouse in the back yard of the café and threw up the breakfast he'd just eaten, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and took a deep breath. 'She won't beat me,' he said under his breath. 'I'll claim what's rightly mine and put her in her place where she belongs. And that Florrie Dobbs had better barricade the door as well. She's not innocent in any of this.'

'You alright, mate?' called out one of Arnold's mates as he made his way back into the café and sat down, taking a big swig from the mug of tea on the table.

‘Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Must have been a dodgy bit of bacon,’ he said, his eyes going to the café owner who stood behind the counter watching the group of men and wishing they’d leave. ‘That’s if it *was* bacon and not cat. Some of the moggies round here have gone missing I hear.’

His mates guffawed and the owner slammed down her tea towel and went across to their table. ‘Well, you know what to do if you don’t like it,’ she said, her hands firmly on her ample hips. ‘And don’t come back, an’ all. There are plenty out there who would love to get their hands on a cheap breakfast. You won’t be getting another one, that’s for sure.’

Arnold and his mates stood, scraping the chair legs across the linoleum, and leaving them standing out from the table, lighting cigarettes before they left the café, then sauntered cockily through the door, leaving the owner tutting behind them.

‘Soldiers, eh?’ she said, shaking her head. ‘What a bloody disappointment. You try and do something nice for ‘em and that’s all the thanks you get.’

‘It’s the married ones what appreciate what you’re doing, missus, ‘cause they don’t have much, do they, what with havin’ kiddies an’ all,’ said an old man sitting at another table who had sensibly kept his head down while the argument was going on. ‘Them lot,’ he indicated the parting group of men with his thumb. ‘All they care about is beer and women and the more the better. I seen them before in the pub, causing all sorts they were. S’pose they’re just letting their hair down after the sights they’ve seen.’

‘Yeah, well they can let their hair down somewhere else. I’ll be keeping my eye out for them in future, that I will. Don’t need the likes of them in here.’



ARNOLD AND HIS MATES separated at the corner of Nightingale Lane and Albany Street with his friends making for the tram to take them up west. Arnold hovered, shoving his hands in his pockets while he decided what to do.

‘You coming, Arnold,’ asked Bert, the friend who was closest in age to Arnold and whom Arnold considered to be the only one he could rely on if needs be. ‘There’s a pub opening outside of hours so us on leave soldiers can get our fill...’ he nudged Arnold, ‘...if you know what I mean. Reckon there’s some decent birds there, not like the trollops round here. Classy like. Could do with a bit of that. How about you?’

Arnold shrugged and smiled. ‘Wish I could, fella. Got some things

to do that I can't put off. Legal things that can't be left or you know I would. Next time, eh?'

Bert clapped him on the back. 'Yeah, next time. I'll keep you to it, though it'll have to be on our next leave. Going back in a couple of days.'

They shook hands and Bert ran to catch the others as the tram drew up alongside them. Arnold waved as they went by then shoved his hands back in his pockets and stared down Nightingale Lane. He knew there were no men in the house apart from the convalescing soldiers, the majority of whom couldn't punch their way out of a wet paper bag so it was probably the safest time to pay a visit. Then he thought about Ida and her rolling pin. She wouldn't be against clouting him around the head with it of that he was certain. Can't let that stop me from taking what's rightly mine, he thought as he headed down Nightingale Lane. She's just a bloody old woman. Perseverance. It always won the day, and he would win, whether they liked it or not.

He stood in front of the house and stared at the door. Someone had painted it recently, black, shiny, and had fixed new brass number nines in the centre that looked like they'd been polished. To the left, by the black wrought iron railings, was a Christmas tree complete with red and gold baubles and some tinsel. He'd forgotten it was nearly Christmas. It didn't mean much to him. He couldn't see what all the fuss was about and he certainly wouldn't be celebrating it. He would be going back to the front after training, and it had rankled him that he was being sent to the front after being in Secunderabad, which apart from the frequent battles with the insurgents, had not tested him. There had been times when he'd felt fear but he'd overcome it, certain he was meant for greater things. And his promotion to staff sergeant had proved it. When he got to the front he would be responsible for more than thirty men, many of them young and who required training. He smiled to himself. He'd been told that if he kept his nose clean he could shortly be made a Class 2 Warrant Officer and from there the sky was the limit.

'And this house would reflect it,' he said under his breath. 'With or without Carrie Dobbs.'



HE STEPPED UP TO THE door and lifted the knocker, letting it fall against the door with a clang. He could hear sounds from inside, and child's high voice piping in the background.

'Mama. Mama. It's the door. Who? Who is it? Is it Dotty?'

Then Carrie's voice, soothing, a tinkle of laughter at her son's excitement, the turn of the key in the lock, the door opening wide,

then the look of shock on Carrie's face.

'Arnold.' Carrie sighed and pushed her little boy behind her. 'What is it you want? Why do you keep coming back here?'

'You know why. Why don't you just admit that there's nothing you can do and let me move in. It will prevent us both being dragged through the courts and paying solicitors their fees.' He changed tack. He'd already decided how he would play it. He'd realised that pushing too hard had the opposite effect to the one he wanted. A softer approach he'd thought. 'Look, Carrie,' he held out his hand as a friendly gesture, as though falling on her graciousness, her kinder side he hoped, if she was capable of one. 'I know I was less than the perfect husband when we were in Secunderabad. It was all new to me and I didn't come out of it very well, I admit that and I'm sorry if I caused you any distress.' He waited to see if her expression changed. It didn't and he inhaled an imperceptible breath hoping his new approach would do the trick. 'As for the other thing...'

Carrie's eyes narrowed. 'What other thing?'

He glanced down at John who was peeking out at him from behind his mother's skirt. 'I'm not sure we should talk about it in front of the lad.'

She nodded. 'Oh. You mean that other thing. I can't imagine there's anything you can do about the...other thing.'

'No, well, I'm not expecting us to be together in that way, and I'm sure you wouldn't want it either, but this is about my rights. I have rights, you see? Under the law my rights are that what you have is mine. A bit like a dowry. So, really, you can't refuse me.'

Carrie closed the door and he heard her go down the hall. When she came back she was alone. She shut the front door and stood on the step directly in front of Arnold, her hands on her hips and her body leaning towards him. She gritted her teeth, her dislike for him apparent in the expression contorting her face.

'I reckon you had your so-called dowry from what I hear. I want you to go, and I don't want you to come back. This is my home, the home I bought with money I earned. It has nothing to do with you. Not one single penny of yours went into the purchase of this house so why you think it's yours is a mystery.'

'You know why, Carrie. You're Mrs Bateman, my wife, and you can get as difficult as you like but it makes no difference. What's yours is mine.'

Carrie frowned then chuckled patronisingly. 'This house is for John, for when he's older. I didn't work all hours God sends just to give you an easy life. You'll take this house over my dead body.'

Arnold took a step back and raised his arm. 'If necessary,' he roared, then swiftly brought down his hand and slapped Carrie across

the cheek. She reeled at the force of the blow, clutching her face as she staggered against the front door. 'And that little bastard will get nothing,' he screamed, pointing at the front door. 'He's a nothing and he'll get nothing and I'll make sure of it.'

A voice from behind made him lower his hand and turn in surprise.

'Sir, sir, what have you done?'

Carrie uncovered her face and looked past Arnold to where Johan stood, shock contorting his features, his arm raised towards Arnold as though beseeching him not to hit Carrie again. 'Stop, sir. You must stop or I will inform the police.'

Arnold spun on his heel, a sneer curling his lip. 'Mind your own business, Stern. She's my wife.'

Johan lowered his hand and his voice and stared hard at Arnold. 'Then I suggest you show some respect, sir. That is no way to treat anyone, let alone a woman, and more importantly your wife. If you do not leave I will report you to the police. I'm sure the officers in your regiment will not look kindly on what you have done. Please don't underestimate my intentions.' He tentatively edged past Arnold and went to Carrie, his hand closing around her arm and opening the front door. 'Go inside, Carrie. Let me quieten this situation.'

'But, Johan...'

'Go inside, my dear,' he said, sotto voce. 'I will join you in a moment if I may.' Carrie nodded and went inside, her cheek smarting sharply from Arnold's slap. Johan turned again to speak to Arnold but could only watch his back as he retreated down Nightingale Lane, turning back now and again to stare at Johan, his eyes as hard as flint, his lip curled in dislike.

Johan rapped his knuckles against the door, not wanting to walk in uninvited. He heard someone bustling down the hall, their laboured breath coming thick and fast as though they were trying to run. The door opened and a breathless Ida stood in front of him, her jowls wobbling, her skin pale with distress. Her eyes were full of tears and she could hardly keep them focussed as she beckoned him inside.

'Oh, sir, sir, now look what's happened.' Tears ran down her cheeks. 'He's gone and hit her again. That awful man. He keeps coming back here, looking for a free ride. I've kept him away as much as I can but a woman with a rolling pin can only do so much. He's upped his game and that's a fact.'

She showed Johan into the hall and took his coat, hanging it on the wooden coat stand.

'What do you mean, Mrs Coyle, again? He has done this before?'

Her hand fluttered to her chest and she swallowed hard. 'When they were in India,' she whispered. 'More than once I've been led to

understand. He's very handy with his fists that one, and he doesn't mind hitting women. Knocked her out once, apparently. Pearl told me.'

Johan shook his head. 'But why would she marry such a man?'

'Well, I'm not sure she had a choice, Master Stern.'

He frowned. 'Everyone has a choice, surely.'

'No, Master Stern. Not everyone.'



HE FOLLOWED IDA INTO the kitchen where Carrie sat at the table with John on her lap, holding a wet cloth against her cheek. She glanced up as he entered the kitchen, then looked away, embarrassment mottling her neck.

'My dear,' Johan said quietly. 'You're in pain?'

She nodded. 'A little, but it won't last long.'

'You know this?'

'Yes, I know.' He sat in the chair next to her, tickling John under the chin which made him giggle. Carrie stiffened, thinking of the impossible situation she was in, that here was John's real father yet neither of them were aware of it. 'Would you like some tea, Johan?' She nodded to Ida who filled the kettle and put it on the range. 'Were you just passing?'

'No, I came to see you. Clearly, I chose the right time, or the wrong time depending on how you see it. I am shocked, Carrie, very shocked that your husband would treat you so badly. I understood he is a soldier fighting for his country and was with you in India. I trust he is the reason you also travelled there. Of that I would respect him, but I cannot respect what I have just seen. It must stop. And the boy?' He glanced at John, his eyes taking in his dark curls and round face. 'He must not see his mother treated so by her husband.'

Carrie noticed he didn't mention the word, father. She stared at him as she took the cold cloth away from her cheek and folded it, placing it on the table in front of her.

'He has never seen it...or at least not since he could understand. I wouldn't have wanted you, or anyone, to see his treatment of me. He is a cruel man. I'm ashamed to call him my husband.'

He leant back in the chair and sighed. 'It would beg the question as to why you do.'

'It's a long story. I might tell you one day when you have time.'

'I will always have time for you, Carrie. I hope you know that.' Ida Coyle cleared her throat noisily, breaking the spell and interrupting Johan's closeness to both Carrie and John. Johan rose and made a little bow. 'What I wanted to tell you can wait for now. I hope you

will permit me to return.'

Carrie smiled as best she could. 'Of course, Johan. You will always be welcome.'

Ida saw Johan to the front door and was about to bade him goodbye when he asked her a question.

'Why does he come here? Her husband? Why does he return?'

'He wants the house, Master Stern. He says it's his right to have it because they're married. He has no claim on it, not really. It's all Carrie, all her hard work, in India and when she got back here. And he hates the little boy with a vengeance, has never shown him a moment of concern even when they were in Secunderabad.' She scratched her chin. 'I think that's how you say it. Anyway, the law might say what's Carrie's is his, but not one penny of his is in this house, of that I promise you. He'll come back here, you mark my words. He won't be happy 'til he's got what he wants.'

When she'd closed the door, she paused before she went back to the kitchen and considered what she had long suspected. She was almost sure that Johan Stern was John's father, and what she had just seen passing between Carrie and Johan gave her cause to believe her suspicions were confirmed. She shook her head. It was something she could hardly believe, that a scullery maid had given birth to a child from the son of her employers. Something had told her when Carrie had left Nightingale Lane in 1915 to get married there was something not right about it. And seeing Carrie and Johan Stern together had confirmed her suspicions. It was a closeness, an almost imperceptible thread between them that Carrie had at least tried to veil. She had also heard along the grapevine about Johan's little boy, Caleb, who had been ill from birth. Could that have been the reason why Johan Stern had called on her at Nightingale Lane? Had something terrible happened?

Ida went back into the kitchen, nervously rubbing her hands together.

'Well, thank goodness he came along when he did. What would we have done if he hadn't?'

'You'd have got out your rolling pin, Ida, like last time.' Carrie eyed the big woman wondering if her secret had been made more transparent by Johan's visit. She had never confided in Ida about John's father. Perhaps now was the right time. 'You know, don't you?'

Ida smiled nonchalantly as she peeled potatoes for the lunchtime soup, trying her best to convey a picture of someone with little interest. 'Know what, ducky?'

'John's father.' She gently pushed the little boy off her lap and told him to take one of his puzzles into her sitting room. He didn't want to go but she gently encouraged him and promised him an early

Christmas chocolate from the tree. He grinned and instantly left the kitchen. Carrie sighed and laughed. 'Bribery and corruption. There's nothing like it for getting your own way.'

'So I hear,' said Ida.

'I wouldn't have kept it from you, Ida. There just didn't seem to be a right time.'

'Not my business, love. I'm just the cook.' She gave a little chuckle.

'No, Ida, you're not just the cook. You're one of my best and closest friends and I should have told you, but I know how you feel about the Sterns, how you look up to them. Johan is John's father.'

Ida got flustered. 'Well. Well, it's nothing to do with me. I'm sorry you were treated so badly, Carrie. Young men from upper class families think that young girls like you are there to be trifled with. I'd hoped for more from Master Stern, that I did.'

'No, Ida, please don't think that of Johan. I...fell for him, fell in love with him as young as I was then. In a big way. I was naïve. I didn't realise it was...not appropriate for a girl of my class and religion to set her sights on someone like Johan. I thought he loved me, expected us to be together when the baby was born, but he married Lizabet and I had to leave my job. Mum married me off to Arnold. He paid her.'

Ida's mouth dropped open and she dropped her peeler. 'He what? And she took it?'

'He gave Florrie money which Dad said she wasted on some scheme my sister's husband had going. I was pregnant. I had no husband and no money. Going to Secunderabad was the best thing that could have happened, although I didn't think it at the time. I met Dorothy and Gita and learned how to stand on my own two feet. Unfortunately, Arnold Bateman was part of the package, something I'm still having to cope with.'

'Does he know about Captain Lawrence?'

'I think he has probably made it his business to know everything. In some ways it's best David isn't living here. It will go against me if there's any sort of legal fight which I just can't even think about. I really wish Johan hadn't seen Arnold hit me, though. It's embarrassing.'

Ida flung her hands to her hips and puffed out a breath. 'Embarrassing, my arse!'

'Ida!'

'Well, you're talking rot, Carrie. Why is it embarrassing? It shouldn't be embarrassing for you, only for him.'

'It lowers a woman, Ida, when a man hits her. Makes her seem like a kicked dog, and no woman wants to be thought of like that.'

'You're no way a kicked dog. A man should never hit a woman.'

That Arnold Bateman is a monster and I'm glad Master Stern saw it. You need as many witnesses as you can get for when he starts slinging mud at you, ducky, and I've no doubt he will.'

'Who'll sling mud?'

They both looked up. Tommy was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, his eyes on Carrie's face. 'What the hell... What happened, Carrie?' he cried as he enfolded his arms around her. 'It was Bateman wasn't it? That bastard. I saw him on the corner of Nightingale Lane and Albany Street with his mates this morning. I wondered if he would come here. I nearly didn't go to Silver Town this morning because I was worried. I wish I hadn't now. Look at the state of your face.'

'You're home early,' said Ida.

'Yeah, well, I wish I'd come home earlier. I'd have punched his bloody lights out.'

Carrie stood, and gently pushing Tommy's arms away went to the door, aware John had been alone for a while and would be getting bored. 'Please don't get involved, Tommy. You've got enough on your plate with Pearl and the baby.'

'I'd better not see him, Carrie. He'll wish he'd never heard the name, Dobbs.'

'Johan was here.'

Tommy frowned. 'Johan? Stern?' Carrie nodded. 'Why?'

'He came to talk to me about something although I don't know what. He stopped Arnold from hitting me. Stepped in and made him leave. To be honest I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't turned up.'

'I never thought I'd be grateful to someone like Johan Stern. Bateman is making enemies hand over fist.'

'Yeah, he is, but he won't give up. He's determined to get what he wants.' She rubbed her hand across her eyes, weary of worrying about it. 'I just don't know what I can do to stop him. I think the law is on his side. That's my problem and he knows it. The only reason he hasn't pressed things legally is because...'

Ida stared hard at her. 'Because? Because of what, ducky?' Carrie glanced at Tommy, then left the kitchen. Ida tutted. 'What now? More secrets.'

'She'll tell you, Ida. One day, she'll tell you but it's hers to tell.' Ida nodded and shrugged as Tommy sat at the table and poured a cup of tea from the huge teapot that was always hot with a brew. 'Do you know about Johan Stern?'

Ida nodded. 'She's just told me. I can hardly believe it.' She shook her head in wonder. 'Whatever's going to happen next, Tommy? It's like one of them plays at the playhouse where everything is going on

all at once. I can't keep up with it.'

'We're all waiting for you to tell us your secrets. I bet you've got loads.'

Ida threw her head back and laughed, her mouth open wide. 'Oh, you. Go on with you. I ain't got no secrets. What you see is what you get with me. I'm what's called an open book.'

Tommy rose from the table and pushed the chair underneath while holding onto his mug of hot tea, then poured another cup for Pearl. 'Mm, you would say that, Ida Coyle. I'll find out about your secret liaisons one of these days. I bet you were a bit of a girl.'

Ida shrieked with laughter again and wiped her eyes on her apron. 'Bit of a girl? Look at the size of me, Tommy. I was never a bit of a girl.'

Tommy went around the table and kissed her on the cheek. Ida flapped her hand at him. 'Get away with you. Go on. You're stopping me from getting on.'

Tommy laughed with her, but as he went into the hall his expression changed. Arnold Bateman was making life impossible for his sister and he felt he should do something to protect her and John. Carrie had asked him not to get involved but he felt involved. He lived at Nightingale Lane and was her brother and the only man she could call on. He knew Carrie was strong and forthright. The last thing she needed was anyone telling her what to do or how to live her life, but Arnold Bateman was something else. It was time the man was told what the score was, and Tommy felt he was the only one to do it.



Chapter 55



ARNOLD SUCKED HARD on his cigarette, his blood running so hot it threatened to boil him. It was clear now that Carrie wasn't going to give in and he would have to ramp things up. He hadn't wanted to take such intense action, particularly as he was going back to the front after Christmas and couldn't keep his mind on it, but he would put it all in the hands of his solicitor, well, that's what he called himself. Arnold was fully aware he wasn't a genuine solicitor with the qualifications that you needed to call yourself one; Arnold thought he had been once but had been struck off, but there was a war on and people were doing all sorts of things to get by. And he knew this man looked after some important people, people you wouldn't want to meet on a dark night it was true, but he was the type of person he needed. Someone who wouldn't be squeamish about certain aspects of his life.

What had enraged him more was Johan Stern's assumption that he could step in and tell him what to do. The man was a disgrace, had managed to dodge going to war although he looked as fit as a butchers' dog and could still afford to wear sharp suits. And that pin in his lapel had a real diamond in it, of that Arnold was certain.

He threw his cigarette butt into the gutter as a thought came to him. How could he afford to live like that even though there was a war on? The man's life had seemingly hardly changed one iota and now he was behaving like Carrie's protector. Why was he there at number ninety-nine? What possible business could he have with Carrie unless he knew about the boy and went there to see him? There was something going on there, no doubt about it, and he would find out what it was. And he'd been digging into what had happened to David Lawrence. He had definitely been living with Carrie because her mother, Florrie told Dolores that he was there, but was apparently in a hospital for victims of shell shock. How would *he* feel, he thought, if he knew Carrie was carrying on again with Johan Stern?

He grinned to himself and looked up at the street sign fixed to the wall over the shabby public house that stank of stale beer and urine,

even though it was closed. Hanbury Street. He looked around at the houses and seedy shops that made up the street, a grocers with nothing in the window, a butchers with a counter full of what looked like rabbit, tripe and little else. He couldn't imagine what the people who lived in the streets of Whitechapel would use their ration cards for in 1918. What's the point of rationing sugar when there wasn't any to be had? There was nothing to buy except offal and a few knobbly potatoes and a few months later they would probably be rationed too.

His thoughts went to the smart, well-kept houses in Nightingale Lane, the place he was determined to live, and forgot that the streets of Whitechapel were the streets he was brought up in, the ones where his mother and father had spent the years of their marriage and where they had given him life. He made his way to a shabby front door that had once been a glossy dark green but had been painted so long ago the wood underneath showed through and all that was left of the original colour were flakes of paint that diminished by the year. He rapped on it with his knuckles and waited but there was no reply, so he went to the window and peered through the shabby net curtain, squinting his eyes into the gloomy front room. He saw a movement, there was someone in he was sure of it. He banged hard on the window then went back to the front door. Seconds later it was opened a crack, then would have been pushed closed again except Arnold had swiftly got his boot onto the inner step which prevented the door from shutting.

'There's no need for that, Florrie. I just want to talk to you.'

'Why?' she answered sulkily through the almost closed door. Arnold pushed hard on it forcing her away from it on the inside and it opened to reveal Florrie in a shabby, once pink dressing gown pulled tightly around her stout middle and fastened with a piece of cord. Her face was deathly white and her eyes were rimmed with red and watering so much she could barely see. 'What do you want?' She sneezed and searched her pocket for a handkerchief which she brought up to her face and wiped her streaming nose.

'You ill?' Arnold asked her, frowning.

'A cold. I've got a bad cold, that's all.'

'Right, well, we need to talk about that daughter of yours.'

'Which one?'

'You know which one. Not the tart. Carrie. The one you pushed onto me.'

Florrie gave a throaty chuckle. 'Pushed onto you? I never pushed her onto you, you came knocking. Dolores told you she was expecting with no man in tow and you thought it would work to your advantage.' She sat heavily on the settee covered with bits of fabric that had seen better days and rubbed her forehead with a calloused

hand. 'And it did, didn't it? You got what you paid for.'

'Well, not exactly. She left me. That wasn't in the deal, was it? She was meant to be my wife for the sake of appearances but it seemed like you left that bit out when you told her she was to be married to me. I didn't want a wife, just someone who would act like one. Seems you didn't tell her that bit.'

Florrie leant against the back of the settee breathing heavily, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. 'She didn't want to marry you so it wouldn't have made no difference what I told her. If you couldn't keep her that's not down to me, that's your fault. From what I hear you didn't exactly act much like a husband to her so I think the blame should be laid at your door.'

Arnold pushed the front door shut and sat in one of the parlour chairs by the fire. 'Oh? And what exactly have you heard?'

'Only that your preferences lay elsewhere. You didn't say anything about that. What did you expect her to do?'

'And who told you that?'

Florrie pulled a face. 'Can't...quite...remember, but what's it matter? You and she aren't together anymore. Why should you care?'

'Yeah, well, I do care. I care 'cause she's got that big house and I've got nothing, and she got the money to buy that big house working in a shop she part owned while she was married to me and living as my wife after I'd paid you every penny. That means I've got a right to it, and after giving you ten pounds, all the savings I had, and then her leaving me after eighteen months I hardly think it was money well spent. I think I'm owed, don't you?'

Florrie shrugged, feeling so unwell she couldn't care less. This moment had been the one she had dreaded. She had thought that Arnold would expect her to pay at least some of the money back he had given her, but as she listened to him talking about what he thought he was owed she realised he wanted more from her than that.

'So what do you want me to do about it? There's nothing I can do.'

'There's plenty you can do. You can back me up for a start. I've got someone on to it, a solicitor, of sorts. I go to France in a few weeks. I'm going to send him to see you and I want you to tell him that Carrie diddled me out of my money, and make sure you lay it on thick. Don't leave any gaps, don't leave anything out. Tell him how difficult she is and that...I dunno...you're ashamed of what she did when she slept with her employer's son, people who took her in on trust and gave her work and she trashed it. Don't say the boy is his. I want people to think he's mine, just for now. When I've got what I want I'll make sure everyone knows he's not mine and then he can go and live with his father. I don't want the little shit living with me.'

'And why would what I say hold any sway?'

‘It might not, but the more people I’ve got on my side the better for me, and I want you to be one of them because you’re her mother and know her better than anyone else or at least that’s what everyone will think. Personally, I don’t think you know her at all. And that husband of yours too. He didn’t turn the money away I gave you, did he?’

Florrie shook her head, frowning. ‘He won’t say anything against her. He didn’t agree with me sending her away with you. There’s no point me talking to him about any of this. It won’t get me anywhere.’

Arnold laughed patronisingly. ‘And that’s not what I heard. Dolores told me he does as he’s told.’

Florrie closed her eyes, wishing fervently he would just go. ‘Maybe once. Not anymore. I don’t know why. He barely looks at me let alone speaks to me and he doesn’t listen either.’

‘You done something, something he’s not proud of?’

‘No, I haven’t.’ Arnold laughed again then rose from the chair and made for the door. Florrie nearly melted with relief. He was going and right at that moment it was all she wanted. ‘When’s this bloke meant to be coming here?’ She sneezed explosively again, followed by two more.

‘A few days. And don’t give him the welcome you’ve just given me. Open the bloody door when he knocks. Alright?’ She didn’t answer. ‘Alright?’ She nodded. ‘Good, cause if I don’t get what I want I’ll be knocking here again for a return of what I gave you. Are we clear?’ She nodded again and Arnold left, slamming the door behind him.

Florrie inhaled deeply and leant forward feeling sick. She tried to sit up but the room swam in front of her eyes and the resultant nausea made her cry out. She took some deep breaths, and when the room stopped spinning pushed herself up from the settee and made her way to the stairs, holding onto the walls as she went. When she got to the stairs, she knelt on each step, pushing herself upwards and resting on the step above with her forearms, her head resting down on them with each step she scaled.

Finally she made it to the top. She crawled into the room she shared with Arthur and pulled herself up onto the unmade bed where she sobbed into her pillow. Never had she felt so ill. She needed help but there was no one to ask. Florrie knew she was on her own.



Chapter 56



JOHAN GOT INTO HIS car parked down from the house in Nightingale Lane and sat for a while. His stomach churned with adrenaline after his altercation with Arnold Bateman. He shook his head in disbelief, then opened the glove compartment and took out a box of Black Russian Sobranie cigarettes and lit one with a match from a small gold box he fumbled for from his inside pocket. He drew deeply on the cigarette, taking the nicotine deep within his lungs to help him calm the anger flowing through his body.

He'd heard what Bateman had called Carrie's son. A bastard. It incensed him to think that a man would call a young child something so cruel, but now he knew the man for what he was, that the person Carrie had married was violent and not afraid of using his fists on a woman.

'What to do,' he murmured to himself, tapping the fingers of his other hand on the steering wheel.

He smoked the cigarette down to the gold rim encircling it and threw it out of the window where it sizzled on the cold pavement before it was snuffed out. His mouth formed a straight line of fury that was uncommon to him. Johan was a gentle soul who had lived his life by the rules that governed his family and so governed him. His mother and father had adhered rigidly to them and those rules of society, class, and religion had stood him in good stead, but because of what he had seen and heard that very morning he felt compelled to break out of those rules and put right a wrong, one he had been implicated in but had been duty-bound to ignore.

His marriage to Lizabet had been arranged between his mother and father and his father's close business associate in the United States, initially without his knowledge. When Ida Coyle had told him about Carrie's own marriage and that her mother had been paid to arrange it the story resonated with him. How strange, he thought, that Carrie and I, although from different levels of society, should in fact be prey to the same constrictions, that the rules and expectations of the life they had been raised in, regardless of class or religion, should enforce

the path of their future.

He closed his eyes and thought of the times he and Carrie had spent together. She had been his first love. From the very first time he had laid eyes on her when she had been serving his mother tea in her drawing room, a rare occurrence as she was only the scullery maid, he had known his true feelings. His breath had caught up in his throat, her dark eyed beauty had almost melted him. She had smiled at him, a small smile, not seductive in any way, perhaps recognising their comparative youth in a household caught up with the formal, constricting ways of a family in a society where breeding and etiquette were more important than anything else.

He had told her he loved her. He remembered telling her many times that he wanted to spend his life with her and she had agreed and returned his love, but on a day that was carved into his memory, his father asked him to meet him at his office to discuss his future. Johan had been overwhelmed with delight, thinking that he would be given a role in his father's business that would ensure him some say in his own future, but it had come with a condition, the marriage to Lizabet, one that would ensure the future of his father's company which Johan realised was far more important to his father than any feelings he might have. He tried to argue with his father, at least attempted to persuade him that it wasn't the only way to ensure a future for the business, but to no avail. He wanted to tell him about Carrie and his feelings for her but knew he had stretched his father's temper to the limit, that anything Johan said would make no difference. He had married Lizabet in a sumptuous ceremony. All the guests were chosen by his mother and father; not one of his friends had been invited. Those who attended were old Jewish friends of the family, and business contacts that Johan had never met.

He opened his eyes and recalled the moment he had seen Carrie serving guests at his wedding. His heart had dropped in his chest. She looked different somehow, drawn, tired, and then it hit him. He lowered his eyes to her middle and immediately he knew. She was pregnant. He would know of course, more than anyone else. He knew her body like he knew his own. They had lain together whenever they got the chance, mostly when Johan's parents were out. He and Carrie had even met at the park. It was risky; had they been caught the fallout would have been immense. The summer had afforded them the chance to escape into the copse of trees away from the street, where they had loved one another. He had even taken a picnic so they could behave like a normal couple even though he knew in his heart they were far from what was deemed normal. A young man of his class courting a scullery maid was unheard of, would have been frowned upon and regarded with utter disgust, even though he knew his father

had other children with a young mistress who he accommodated in an apartment in a seedier part of London, a woman he visited on a regular basis. He knew it was common behaviour for the wealthy but the knowledge that it was significant in his own father's life had devastated him.

At first he assumed his mother had no knowledge of the woman and the children she had borne his father, but one evening when Conrad Stern was late for a dinner party at their home he'd heard her say to her closest friend who was a guest, she assumed he was with his tart. It had shocked him to the core that she had known about his father's other family, yet seemed to accept it. This wasn't what he wanted for Carrie, but while he was on honeymoon with Lizabet she had left his parents employ without telling him about the baby. Then the war began. It was Ida Coyle who told him she had married and travelled with her new husband to India after she'd left Nightingale Lane. He'd stoically accepted that he would probably never see Carrie again, and certainly not have a relationship with his child.

It was purely by chance that he discovered Carrie had returned to England. Curious about the new owners of his former home he had driven by on a number of occasions until one fateful day he had seen Carrie leave the house by the front door. Intrigued, he had parked at the end of the street until she walked by, unsuspecting of his watching her. She was beautifully dressed in a pale green suit with hat and shoes to match and carrying herself with a new confidence. He had smiled to himself, assuming that her husband must have purchased the house for them, but when he'd made enquiries into who was living there the purchaser's name was Caroline Bateman. The house was being used as a convalescent home for wounded soldiers and it was then that Johan realised Carrie was no longer with her husband.

A thrill had gone through him at this knowledge until he reminded himself of Lizabet and her grief at Caleb's heart condition, one he'd inherited from Johan. He'd wanted to tell Carrie that any child he fathered would be at risk of inheriting his condition, but to do that would alert her to the fact that he knew of her pregnancy. He had deserted Carrie at a time when she needed him most. He should have been stronger, more forthright with his father, and not allowed him to bully him into a marriage he did not want. To say he didn't love Lizabet was wrong. He had found a love for her, built on mutual respect and friendship, and since Caleb's birth their joint devastation and concern for his health. But there was no passion between them. Lizabet had been treated like a princess by her mother and father, and expected the same treatment from Johan. She was a delicate woman; her tolerance of anything unpleasant or difficult was almost nil and Caleb's illness had highlighted her fragility. Their home was like a

palace, beautifully furnished in expensive fabrics and in a desirable location, financed almost entirely by her father since the collapse of the Stern's business. This was a situation Johan found almost intolerable, their reliance on the generosity of her parents was a situation he would have rebuffed had things been different, but Caleb had to come first and therefore he felt he could not expect Lizabet to accept a drop in the standards she had been used to while they were caring for him.

Only two days before, Caleb had passed away. They had both held him as he'd struggled for the last breaths he would ever take, the memory of which would never leave Johan. Lizabet was inconsolable. She had shut herself in their bedroom, the blinds permanently down, the curtains closed, neither eating nor drinking. She said the world was too cruel with its brightness and twinkling lights; that being in darkness allowed her to feel closer to Caleb, and even though Johan had entreated her to leave the room, even just for a moment, she had refused.

That morning, after another night spent alone in his dressing room, Johan had made the decision to speak to Carrie about the boy she had told him was called Gregory. He was well aware this was not his name and that she had called him John. This alone pointed to the boy being his son, and when he had seen him in the hall and then later sitting on Carrie's lap, he had become convinced John was his. His dark chestnut curls and features were like Johan's when he was a child, almost his double, and Johan's heart had lurched at the sight of him. Had he given the condition to John he had unwittingly passed on to Caleb? He prayed not, but he knew he must tell Carrie of his fears which would be at the expense of his marriage to Lizabet should she ever discover what had happened between Johan and Carrie in the past.

He started up the motor car and drove without speed to the end of Nightingale Lane, his thoughts in turmoil. As he turned the corner he saw Arnold Bateman talking with a woman. She was young, as thin as a rake and in need of a good meal, her hair brassy with peroxide and her lips painted bright red, the antithesis of Lizabet.

Of Carrie.

Johan narrowed his eyes and drove as slowly as he could around the corner where he parked the motor car, allowing the engine to idle. He turned in his seat and watched out of the back window as Arnold grabbed the woman's arm, pointing down Nightingale Lane. He watched them until the woman yanked her arm away from Arnold's hand and walked away from Nightingale Lane with Arnold walking in the opposite direction.

'He's up to something,' Johan said under his breath. 'I won't let you harm a hair on my son's head,' he murmured. 'Or Carrie's. It will

not happen.'



TWO HOURS LATER JOHAN arrived at his home in Victoria Square. He switched off the engine, and rested his forehead against the steering wheel, wondering what he would face when he entered his home. The lights were on downstairs; his parents no doubt reading and sipping an aperitif before lunch was served as was their usual habit.

He glanced up at the windows on the second floor. The blinds were down, the curtains closed. Lizabet was still in her room. He sighed and swallowed hard. The loss of Caleb had hit him hard, and his grief was almost more than he could bear, but he'd had his mother and father to turn to and they had comforted him. Lizabet had no one. She had not settled well in London, had made no friends while they had lived in Victoria Square, and because of Caleb's condition had hardly left the house. He wondered if he should take her to her home in the United States where she could spend time with her family. He nodded, agreeing with himself. Yes, he would suggest it after the funeral. It would be the best place for her to be. She would be safe there.



Chapter 57



CARRIE KNOCKED ON THE doors of Alitza and Hannah's rooms and asked them to join her and Ida for lunch. The women had asked Carrie if they could help her look after the soldiers who came to her for care after a hospital stay. The workload had increased and Carrie wasn't sure if recruiting the women as her helpers was the right thing to do. She'd discussed it at length with Ida and Pearl in Pearl's bed-sitting room as she continued her bedrest recovery from Eliza's birth.

'Why wouldn't you agree?' asked Pearl as she sipped her tea. 'They must get so fed up, sitting up there in the attic all day. The only time they're happy to leave the house is when they go to the markets with Ida. It would release you to do other things.'

'What other things?'

Pearl placed the delicate china cup lightly on the saucer and gave a small smile. 'Carrie, you hardly ever mention David these days. You work so hard, and this new problem with Arnold Bateman is taking up whatever is left of your time when you've finished looking after the boys. When do you get a chance to be Carrie again?'

Ida nodded. 'She's right, Carrie. These last few months have been like a whirlwind. We've barely had a chance to breathe what with all the new boys coming in and taking in the Belgian refugees. And then there's the Bateman thing. And what about John?'

Carrie looked upset and stared down at her cup. 'Do you think I'm not a good mother to him? Have I neglected him?'

Ida shook her head vehemently. 'You're a wonderful mother, but you're tired and overworked. Perhaps you and John could take a little break.'

Carrie widened her eyes. 'And go where?'

'How about the seaside?' said Pearl, grinning. 'Little boys love the seaside.'

'What, and get bombed? The coasts are coming under fire from the Bosch, you know that.'

'Yes, but it's slowed down a bit now, ducky. You could get a train to Brighton for instance. A train ride for little John. He would love it.'

‘But it’s nearly Christmas. I can’t go before Christmas.’

‘Then go afterwards when things have calmed down a bit. And it’ll be cheaper. Places are always more expensive over the Christmas time.’

‘And you could go shopping for some nice things. Go up west, to that big store..., Selfridges, isn’t it? I’ve heard it’s amazing,’ said Pearl. ‘You could get some little gifts.’ Pearl sipped her tea again, glancing at Ida. ‘Dorothy could go with you.’

Carrie turned to Ida then back at Pearl. ‘You planned this, didn’t you, between you, you and Dorothy. Honestly, look what I’m up against. I don’t stand a chance.’

Ida and Pearl laughed. ‘We’re a united force,’ said Pearl. ‘And we want you to think about David again. We know you haven’t given up on him, but we think you should try again, to see him. Perseverance, Carrie. It’s what you’ve always said to me.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Yes, I know. You’re right, but I’ve had so much on my mind. It’s been never-ending lately. And as for David...’ She sighed, wanting so much to think deeply about David but unable to bear the hurt thoughts of him brought her. ‘I feel that it’s out of my hands. You know what he said, he doesn’t want to see me again. Or Dorothy and Marcus, or anyone. And I wrote to him as Ida suggested and was encouraged when I was so sure he read it, at least he didn’t return it, but he didn’t reply. I don’t even know if he’s still at the Alexandria.’ She sighed again. ‘I s’pose I could ask but I’m scared of what I’ll hear. If he’s left there without telling anyone...well, that would be awful.’

Alitza and Hannah had been sitting with Hannah’s daughters in Alitza’s room, knitting gloves and scarves as presents for Joshka, Gregor and Benjamin. They had gone to the church hall with Ida to one of the jumble sales and bought woollens for the price of pennies to wash, unpick, roll into skeins and reknit into garments the men could wear while they were working. Lila and Rebekah, Hannah’s daughters, had giggled when they’d seen the bright colours of some of the woollens, but Hannah had insisted they give something bright to cheer the men up.

‘I will knit Benjamin a hat in black, red, and yellow stripes, like our flag,’ she’d said smiling, ‘to remind him of home. Lila, you can knit him socks and Rebekah, gloves. We must all do what we can.’

Alitza had picked a green woollen pullover to unpick and reknit into a scarf for Gregor, and a blue one for Joshka.

‘I wish we could go home,’ she said, wistfully. ‘Everyone here is so kind but it is not our home, not our country. I will die before I get there.’

Hannah had shushed her, frowning. She didn’t want her girls to

hear such talk. Alitza had taken to talking about Belgium as if they would never see it again and she was worried the girls would be scared. They had been so frightened when the soldiers had invaded and all she wanted for them was some peace and the knowledge that soon they would be in their farmhouse again, taking care of the sheep and goats as they had before the war. As she knitted she wondered what was left there for them to go home to; if their home had been left unscathed. She doubted it but she was determined, with Benjamin, to rebuild their lives if only they would be given the chance.

The knock on the door startled them out of their private thoughts. Rebekah left her seat and ran to open it, grinning when she saw Carrie standing outside. She loved Carrie and wanted to be like her when she grew up. Carrie was beautiful and strong and she knew Joshka had special feelings for her. She had heard him speaking to her father one night when they had thought the girls were asleep. They had brought a bottle of whiskey home from work with them and smuggled it up to the attic where both families were staying. The whiskey had loosened their tongues and she'd heard Joshka say to Benjamin that Carrie was a special woman, that he thought her beautiful and would like to have a woman like her. Rebekah dreamed that Carrie would return to Belgium with them when they were allowed to go home, that she would marry Joshka and be part of their community. She wished it, she hoped for it, and she prayed for it. To have a friend like her in their community would be a wonderful thing.

'Carrie,' she said, her voice carrying a huge smile.

'Hello, Rebekah. Can I speak to your mother?' In the months they had lived in London the refugees had learnt a little English, and Carrie hoped they knew enough for them to take on what they'd asked for. Rebekah opened the door wider and Carrie stepped in, marvelling at the work the women were undertaking. 'This is very good,' she said smiling. 'You work hard.'

The women nodded and smiled. 'For my husband,' said Hannah, 'and Gregor and Joshka.' Lila and Rebekah giggled when Hannah said Joshka's name, and Hannah frowned at them crossly. 'Shush, girls. Ondeugende!' The girl's faces changed, their giggles dropping from their mouths and their eyes on their knitting. Hannah turned to Carrie again, smiling. 'I'm so sorry. What is it?'

'You and Alitza said you wanted to help with the soldiers.' Alitza glanced up, her old eyes shining.

Hannah nodded. 'Yes, yes, I do. And Alitza.'

'Well, I'd like to offer you a few hours starting from tomorrow to see how you get on. Sometimes the work isn't very pleasant...er...nice. It can be hard, sad.' She pulled a sad face and hoped they could understand her.

Hannah stood, allowing her knitting to drop from her lap, and rushed forward to clasp Carrie's hands. 'Yes, yes, we would like to help. We need to be...part of family, to help, yes?'

Carrie nodded, her heart lurching at how happy they seemed. 'Tomorrow then, early, five thirty to check the boys and serve breakfast.'

Alitza was standing now too. Hannah turned and smiled at her. 'Alitza. Morgen vroeg. Vijf dertig?'

Alitza nodded her agreement. 'Ja. Bedankt.'

'She says thank you,' said Hannah.

Carrie laughed. 'I should thank *you*, so...thank you.'



THE FOLLOWING MORNING Hannah and Alitza arrived in the kitchen at five thirty. Their faces were scrubbed clean, their hair swept up into chignons and covered with new cotton scarves bought from the market. They waited expectantly at the door for Carrie to give them some instruction into the care of the boys, looking nervous and out of place.

'Have you eaten anything?' Ida asked them. Both women shook their heads. 'It's probably best to eat afterwards, when the boys have been served theirs and we've cleared away and washed up. We usually get breakfast at about half past seven. We like to sit together and talk about the boys and anything that needs doing.' Hannah and Alitza nodded again as Ida glanced into the hall. 'Here's Carrie now. She'll guide you.'

'Morning,' Carrie said brightly as she went to a cupboard in the kitchen where a schedule was written in her neat hand and pinned to the door. 'Right. Follow me, ladies. I'll show you where we keep the iodine and the morphine. Do either of you have any nursing experience?' They both frowned and Carrie realised she must speak more simply. 'Right.' They followed her into the pantry where the medication was kept under lock and key. 'We lock it...,' she mimed the key in the lock, 'to keep it safe.' They smiled and nodded. Carrie took a rolled bandage from the pantry and held it up. 'You know this?'

'Ja,' said Alitza. 'Verband.'

'Ban..dage?' said Hannah. 'You wrap...' She mimed wrapping a bandage around her arm.

Carrie grinned. 'Yes, that's right.' She held up a bottle of iodine. 'This is used to clean the wound...but first, warm water that has already been boiled.' She held up a pitcher of warm water and mimed cleaning a wound with a muslin pad. 'Then,' she tipped the bottle of iodine up allowing a little to fall on a new damp pad and mimed

washing the wound, dabbing at her arm. 'This is an antiseptic to stop infection. You understand?' Hannah nodded and translated for Alitza. Alitza nodded enthusiastically.

'Right,' said Carrie, smiling encouragingly at the two women. 'Let's see the first patient. His name is Bertie and he's nineteen. He has burns on one of his legs so we must be careful to make sure there is no infection present. Ready?'

She led them up the first flight of stairs to the first-floor landing and knocked on one of the doors.

'Bertie, it's Carrie. Good morning.'

'Come in, Carrie.'

Carrie opened the door. A young man lay on a bed in a room painted a calming pale green with lace curtains at the window. He was clothed apart from his left leg which was resting on a cushion on top of the covers and enfolded in a clean white bandage from calf to thigh. 'How are you today? Has the morphine dulled the pain?'

'It definitely helped, Carrie, but it's a bit rough this morning. S'pose it's worn off.'

'Your last dose was at midnight so you can have more now. This is Hannah and Alitza our guests from Belgium. They're going to help you for a few days.'

'That's alright. Just want to get rid of the pain. I'm worried about the burn. I don't want to go back to hospital. I'd rather stay here.'

'Shall we have a look at it?' Bertie nodded unenthusiastically, knowing that the removal of the bandage would be painful. 'We'll give you a dose of morphine now and hopefully by the time the bandage comes off and the new one's in place you'll be feeling better.' She gave him the morphine in a cup, scrubbed her hands at the small sink in the corner of the room, then proceeded to remove the bandage. Bertie winced as she got closer to the flesh on his leg, tensing shoulders that he pulled up to his ears in anticipation of pain. 'It looks alright to me, Bertie. It's clean and healing well. Fresh skin is appearing at the site of the burn. You should be pleased.'

He smiled and sighed with relief. 'I am. Do you think I'll be able to go home for Christmas?'

Carrie shrugged. 'The thing is, Bertie, it depends on who's at home. You still need medical attention and it's not really my decision. It'll be the nurse who decides if your wound has healed enough. She's usually spot on.'

'Mum's at home, and I've got three older sisters.'

Carrie laughed. 'And I bet they dote on you.'

His face flushed but he smiled. 'They do a bit. I don't think I'll be short of nurses, let's put it that way, in fact if I know anything about them they'll be fighting over me.'

‘Lucky you.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘Not always. It can get a bit much.’

‘Well, I think you should tell the nurse about your mum and sisters when she comes. I reckon there’s a good chance you’ll be going home soon.’



BACK IN THE CORRIDOR Carrie, Alitza and Hannah stood outside the door. ‘What do you think, Hannah? Could you change Bertie’s bandage for the next day or two? I administer morphine so you don’t have to worry about that. As long as you follow what I’ve shown you you’ll do it right. Just make sure you wash your hands before you touch every patient. Infections can spread from patient to patient and it’s the last thing we want.’ Hannah translated for Alitza and Carrie took them to meet some of the other patients, specifically those who would shortly be ready to go home. When they’d finished they returned to the kitchen where Ida had been readying the trays to be delivered to the rooms.

‘Right, said Carrie. ‘We take a tray to each room. They all have the same breakfast, porridge, and then an egg and a bit of bacon as long as we can get it. We return after they’ve eaten and clear the trays. Ida and Francis will have already taken them a cup of tea. They get tea first thing, almost as soon as they wake.’

The trays were taken to the patients and then cleared. Tommy came into the kitchen to fetch a tray for Pearl and was surprised to see Hannah and Alitza washing up.

‘This is new.’

‘Yeah, I know. I’m going to try and rest up for a bit.’

He chuckled. ‘You, rest up? Is that a joke? You don’t know how to keep still.’

‘Ida and Pearl have arranged a shopping trip for me with Dorothy. We’re going to Selfridges tomorrow to buy things for Christmas, that’s if they’ve got anything to buy.’

He looked at her with approval. ‘It’s about bloody time ‘an all. You need some fun to take your mind off things, especially with Bateman hanging about.’

She looked away. ‘I don’t want to talk about him.’

‘Hopefully, you won’t have to for too much longer.’

She frowned. ‘How do you mean.’

He leant towards her bearing his teeth. ‘The Bosch might get him.’

She shook her head. ‘Tommy.’

‘What? It’s the best thing that could happen. We can forget all about him then. Let’s hope they make him their main target. Boom,

and he's gone.'

'You're terrible saying things like that.'

'Am I? The good Lord will be my judge.'

'Not sure how happy he'll be to hear what you just said.'

Tommy shrugged. 'Bateman runs with the devil. I don't think the good Lord will have a problem with what I've said. I'm banking on him helping us out a bit.'

She watched him walk out of the kitchen with Pearl's breakfast tray. Feeling someone's eye's on her she glanced up to find Ida watching her. Carrie raised her eyebrows and Ida shook her head.

'That's dangerous talk, that is,' Ida said, sotto voce. She glanced at Hannah and Alitza who were standing at the sink washing up, their backs to them. 'I don't like to hear our Tommy talking like that. It's not like him.'

'No, it isn't. He's not the same. He seems angry lately.'

'P'raps you should have a talk with him.'

'He's a married man with a child, Ida. How much notice do you think he's going to take of what I think?'

'He respects you and your opinions, but you're right, he's not the same. I'm hoping it's just because of what happened to Pearl and his worry over Elizabeth. He needs to forget about Bateman and let you sort it out.'

'Yeah, and I need to sort it out, don't I? Sort it once and for all and then we can forget all about him.'

'What will you do?'

'There's only one language Arnold speaks and that's money. I've got some savings. I'm just hoping it will be enough.'

Ida gaped at Carrie, her shoulders dropping in dismay. 'Oh, Carrie, no, not your savings.'

'What else can I do, Ida? It's all I have to give him and I just want him to stop coming here. I worry about it all the time and I'm not sleeping. At first it was worrying about David that kept me awake at night but now it's Bateman...well, both really. I don't know who keeps me awake the most. I'm so tired.'

Ida came round the table and put her arms around Carrie, resting her floury cheek on top of Carrie's head. 'I know, sweetheart. You look tired an' all. You're too young to have all these worries. It's not right, it really isn't. And to give him the money you've worked hard for.' She tutted. 'Makes my blood boil.'

'I know what Tommy means though, Ida. Life would be so much easier if he wasn't around.'

Ida gently pushed Carrie away from her and looked at her kindly. 'Promise me you'll forget all about him tomorrow,' she said softly. 'Promise you'll enjoy yourself. Don't even think about David either.'

You can worry about him another time. We all want you to have a good time and put your worries aside, just for a day.'

Carrie smiled at the woman whose heart was the biggest she'd ever known. 'And I will, Ida. I promise. I'm looking forward to it, and Dorothy will help me forget for a while. She'll want to be Dorothy again for a day I'm sure. It'll be fun, a day to remember.'



CARRIE WAS AWAKE AND out of bed early the following morning. She knew Dorothy would dress to the nines for their day out and she'd bought a new outfit, a dark blue shift dress with a coat to match, one she hoped would give her confidence. As she pinned the matching hat onto her hair that she'd swept up into a chignon of curls someone knocked on the door of her bedroom. With one hand holding her hat in place she opened the door to find Pearl sitting in her wheelchair in the hall, a floral housecoat wrapped tightly around her frail frame.

'Pearl? Are you alright?' Carrie peeked out of the door and looked both ways. 'How on earth did you get up here?'

Pearl smiled and chuckled. 'Course I am, stop worrying. This is the first time I've been out of bed and come up onto any of the other floors for ages. I just wanted to say have a lovely time and familiarise myself with the house again. Honestly, Carrie, I feel like one of them suffragettes on house arrest. I'm feeling so much better now. Tommy and Joshka carried me up the first flight. They're in the kitchen having breakfast, but I wanted to come and see you before you went out. Oh,' she sighed. 'It's so nice to get out of that room as lovely as it is.'

'I know how hard it's been for you,' Carrie said through a mouth full of hairpins as she finished pinning her hat, 'but you've still got to take it easy. We don't want any setbacks and I promised your doctor I would take good care of you and not let you do too much.'

'It's alright, Tommy's already warned me. He said if I behave myself he'll take me to the hospital on Christmas Eve to see Eliza. Oh, Carrie, I can't wait to see her. They might even let me hold her.'

'She seems to be doing well, Tommy says. Putting on weight, which is what they've been hoping for, isn't it? Don't get your hopes up, Pearl. It might be you and Tommy looking through a window again like you did before. And if it is it's only because they're protecting her, you know that.'

Pearl nodded. 'I know, I know, it'll be for the best, but I can't help hoping.'

A car horn sounding in Nightingale Lane made Carrie go to the window. She smiled and waved at Dorothy who was standing on the

pavement waiting for Carrie to go down.

‘I thought we were going by Tube but it looks like Dorothy has use of the car. She’s got a driver too. Blimey, Pearl, I think we’re going in style.’

Pearl clapped her hands. ‘Of course you are, it’s your special day.’

Carrie leant down and placed a kiss on Pearl’s forehead. ‘What would you like me to bring you back? Anything. I’ll try and get it for you.’

‘Be nice to have some chocolate. I could do with putting on a bit of weight. Some of Selfridges posh chocolate would be nice, oh, and maybe a pretty scarf I can wear during Christmas. I’m not sure Tommy will want me to dress and be up and about properly Christmas Day, but a bright scarf would be lovely.’

‘Your wish is my command,’ cried Carrie as Pearl giggled. ‘Wait here and I’ll tell Tommy and Joshka to come and get you.’

‘Have a lovely time, Carrie.’

‘I will, sweetheart. See you tonight.’



DOROTHY LEANT BACK into the leather seat of the motor vehicle and lit a cigarette. She closed her eyes and inhaled, her face relaxing, a smile playing on her lips.

‘I know it sounds awful, darling, but I’m so glad to get away for a while. I love being a mother, the twins are my pride and joy, but honestly, it’s so draining. And I haven’t been shopping once since I gave birth. Can you imagine?’

Carrie laughed and looked at Dorothy with affection. ‘You’re so funny. Yes, I can imagine, although having one baby was hard enough. Having two at the same time...that I can’t imagine.’

‘I feel like I’ve lost myself, Carrie, as if all I am is a feeding machine like some cow. It worries me that Marcus may be looking at me differently, you know, not quite like the woman I was.’

‘Don’t be silly, Dorothy. He adores you.’

‘D’you think?’

‘No. I know. And it doesn’t last forever. I must admit I’m surprised you’re still feeding Violet and Sebastian. What will they do today?’

I expressed my milk and left it for them. I’m padded up to the hilt I can tell you. I don’t want anything to spoil today. I might have to lose some milk when we’re shopping, but I understand Selfridge has built a powder room within the store for ladies, he’s quite the forward-thinking man, so I can go there and do what I have to do.’

‘Is it normal, I mean, doing that?’

Dorothy shrugged. ‘I have no idea, but I can’t think of another

way.'

'Is it true that the owner of this store supports the suffragettes?' asked Carrie as they got out of the car on the corner of Oxford Street. 'I heard he is very much for them and thinks women should be given more rights.'

'Yes, it is true,' said Dorothy. 'His name is Harry Selfridge, an American. He even sells items in our colours, white, purple and green, and has taken out advertising for the store in suffragette magazines.'

'Why do you think he supports them?'

'Maybe he does or maybe he doesn't, or maybe he can see that most of his customers are women, many with money and from middle- and upper-class society, who wouldn't frequent Selfridges if he took a firm stand against the suffragettes. He's a businessman, Carrie, who no doubt always has his eyes on the bottom line. And he's a married man. Who's to say it's not his wife who encourages his patronage. Plus, since he has shown support he hasn't had a brick through his window lately, like some of the other stores in London.'

'But a suffragette did throw a brick through one of the windows, didn't they?'

'Yes, about four years ago, but Harry Selfridge refused to press charges and all has been quiet for him ever since.' Carrie nodded. 'He's very shrewd. He knows that in the salons of Eaton Square, Knightsbridge, and Holland Park, it's the women who spend the money, and don't think the war has meant there is no money to be had. You'll see when we get inside. Watch the people as they walk around the store and see who's doing the persuading.'

'I will,' said Carrie. 'This is all so new to me. It's like there's a world outside of the one I know. The suffragettes are so brave, they don't seem to worry about being arrested or put in prison.'

'They don't, but increasingly it's women with money who are making names for themselves in the suffragette movement. They have others to look after their children, to do the things in their homes that poorer women must do for themselves. Consequently, women from the working classes aren't able to take part in the rallies or be part of any action.' She looked at Carrie with contrition. 'Sorry, darling. I didn't mean to...'

'It's alright, Dorothy. We can't all be the same.'

Dorothy stood on the pavement in front of Selfridges and looked up. 'Well? What do you think?'

Carrie stopped and stood next to Dorothy, her mouth dropping open. 'I've never seen anything like it. Is this one store?'

'It is, and it's waiting for us. Are you ready?'

Carrie giggled. 'I've never been more ready.'



A COMMISSIONAIRE STOOD in the entrance and greeted them as they went through the engraved glass doors. Inside, the vast interior glowed with countless sparkling chandeliers hanging from the ornate ceilings, sending sparks of light from the dangling prisms onto the counters and floors and the faces of the customers.

‘This is so beautiful,’ breathed Carrie. ‘It’s like another world.’

‘Yes, and Selfridge has kept the store going even though there’s a war on. Haven’t you noticed, everyone who works here is female, except the rather elderly commissioner, of course. Even the porters are women. We’ve taken over the jobs men did, you see, in every walk of life. We’ve had to do it to keep the country going. I hope we get the recognition we deserve. And when this damnable war is over there won’t be as many men to do the jobs they used to do. Women will have to take the lead.’ She glanced at Carrie and gave a little smile. ‘Sorry. I do go on about it don’t I, but it’s so important and will become even more so. Anyway,’ she flapped her hand in the air, ‘let’s forget all that for now. Are you looking for something in particular?’

‘I don’t know where to look first, there’s so much here. Pearl wanted some posh chocolate and a pretty scarf. Maybe we could start there.’

Dorothy stood on tiptoe then pointed to a corner of the store. ‘Over there. Scarves. Lots of them. Let’s go and look.’

They wended their way around the counters until they came to the scarf counter where a young woman was folding scarves and putting them in the glass display cabinet, and hanging others on displays that looked like Christmas trees.

‘Oh, my goodness. There’s so many,’ cried Carrie. ‘I’m spoilt for choice.’

‘What are her colours?’ asked Dorothy. ‘She has rather fetching red hair.’

‘I think she wanted something Christmassy. How about this lovely green one. It would look so beautiful on her, and it’s got flashes of gold through it. I think she’d like this one.’

‘How much is it?’

Carrie turned the label over. ‘Ten shillings. Blimey’

‘Definitely worth it. It’s silk, darling.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Yes, you’re right. And it’s lovely, and I really think she could do with a little treat. Now for the chocolate.’

‘Chocolate too?’

‘I promised her. And I’d like to get some for John as well. What about you? Will you get some for the girls?’

‘Yes, I think so. They do love it so but I try to limit it. Must say I think a bit too much of it sends them silly, at least Marcus thinks so. I never give it to them before bedtime.’

They wandered around the counters, picking up trinkets and little gifts they thought their loved ones would like.

‘We mustn’t forget ourselves,’ said Dorothy.

Carrie laughed. ‘I can’t ever imagine you doing that, Dorothy.’

Dorothy laughed good-naturedly and made for the clothes department. ‘We’ll have to go up the stairs to the first floor. They have a salon there where they hold fashion shows. Perhaps you and I can come when they have the next one. It’s often held to raise funds for a charity. We did one for the Belgian refugees.’

Carrie gazed at her in disbelief. ‘Do you know Harry Selfridge?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Dorothy said, as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world. ‘Everyone knows Harry Selfridge.’

Dorothy led the way up the stairs to the salon where she bought herself a dress for an evening musical soiree she and Marcus were attending the following week, and before the morning was over they were both laden with carrier bags emblazoned with the Selfridges logo. ‘Time for some lunch I think. My treat. You go to the restaurant. I must go to the bathroom before I eat. I can feel something happening and that would be very embarrassing in front of all the ladies who lunch.’

‘I expect it’s happened to them too.’

‘Not in Selfridges restaurant it hasn’t.’

Carrie looked out for the signs etched in gold-leaf that guided her to the restaurant. She walked along a carpeted corridor to a set of mahogany double doors where a young woman stood at a lectern wearing an outfit in the Selfridges livery. She looked up and smiled as Carrie approached.

‘Yes, madam?’

‘Oh, do we need to book?’

‘Yes, Madam. Do you wish to make a reservation?’

‘I think a table may have been reserved. May I wait for a moment? My friend will be here soon. I think she may have arranged it.’

The girl frowned. ‘The name?’

‘Mrs Tremaine.’

The girl ran her finger down the list of reservations then slowly shook her head. ‘No, no...I’m sorry. There’s no reservation for Tremaine.’

‘I’m Dorothy Tremaine,’ said Dorothy who joined Carrie at the lectern. ‘Harry...Mr Selfridge made the reservation for us.’

The girl looked down again at the huge book in front of her. ‘I’m sorry, Mrs. Tremaine. There’s nothing down here.’

‘It’s alright, Felicity,’ said a male voice with a strong American accent behind them. ‘I made the booking for Dot. I just forgot to put it in the book. It’s my fault,’ he said, holding his hands up. ‘I’m sure Felicity isn’t pleased with me.’ He made a small bow to the girl. ‘It’ll never happen again, I promise,’ he said smiling broadly.

Dorothy grinned. ‘Oh, Harry, it’s lovely to see you, darling. How’s Rose, and the children?’

‘Hi, Dorothy. They’re absolutely fine. Rose would have loved to see you but she’s out on one of her art hunting forays. You know how she loves it.’

‘Oh, I do. We’ll have to arrange something. It would be so good to get together again.’

‘I’ll make sure we do. Now, Dorothy, I’m sure you and your guest need some refreshment after your morning’s shopping.’ He eyed their bags. ‘Looks like you’ve made me a few more dollars between you. Go take your table, ladies. Lunch is on Harry Selfridge.’ Carrie eyes widened and she glanced at Dorothy. She could hardly believe she was about to be treated to lunch by the famous Harry Selfridge. She couldn’t help staring at the bespectacled, immaculately dressed man standing in front of her.

‘Thank you, Harry. That’s so sweet of you. My turn next time,’ said Dorothy.

The maitre d’ showed Dorothy and Carrie to a table next to a window looking out onto Oxford Street and dressed with the finest lace curtains. The walls were painted in an elegant cream and among the round tables were pedestals on which there were tall vases planted with ferns. Above their heads were the biggest chandeliers Carrie had ever seen and she surveyed it all with the eyes of a child in a toy shop. ‘This is so beautiful,’ she breathed as they perused the menu and ordered aperitifs.

‘Dorothy,’ whispered Carrie. ‘I can’t believe this is happening.’

‘What, darling,’ said Dorothy, not taking her eyes from the menu.

‘That we’re eating lunch here, and that it’s being paid for by Mr Selfridge.’

Dorothy moved the menu to one side. ‘Well, I don’t see why not. We’ve just spent money here, and we’re friends...of sorts. No, darling, enjoy it while you can.’ She chuckled. ‘I do.’

They ate a sumptuous lunch of quails eggs and salmon, followed by fresh berries and cream.

‘That was gorgeous,’ said Carrie. ‘I’m fit to burst.’

‘Yes, me too. I think I overdid the cream a bit,’ said Dorothy, wiping her mouth on a napkin. ‘Never mind. I’ll walk it off tomorrow.’ She looked over Carrie’s shoulder and frowned. ‘Am I seeing things? Isn’t that Tommy?’

Carrie started and looked up frowning. 'What?' she cried, turning in her seat to where Dorothy was looking. Her heart dropped in her chest when she saw Tommy standing by the doors to the restaurant looking totally incongruous in the palatial surroundings, his eyes searching for her in the throng of lunching ladies. 'Tommy! Tommy, over here.' He glanced in her direction then shook his head as he turned his cap round and round in his fingers. Carrie glanced at Dorothy who nodded. She rose swiftly from her seat and went to where Tommy was standing looking ready to take flight. 'What are you doing here,' she began before she'd even got to him. 'Oh my God, Tommy, what's happened? Is it Pearl,' her face blanched, 'or Eliza? Why are you here?'

He grabbed her arm and pulled her past Felicity who was still at the lectern watching them with interest, and into the corridor. 'It's Mum. It's Florrie. I'm sorry, Carrie. I know today's important to you but I knew you'd want me to come.'

'Yeah, but why? What's happened to her?'

'She's been ill apparently, and taken a turn for the worst. Dad came to Nightingale Lane to find you.'

'What?' Carrie's stomach somersaulted. The first time her father had ever visited her home and it was to tell her, her mother was ill. 'When you say ill, what are we talking about?'

'Flu.'

'She's got the flu?'

'Yep, and it's started to take some people off, 'specially people like her, badly nourished and of an age.'

'Yeah, I know that but I don't know anyone it's taken do you? People get colds and flu all the time, particularly at this time of year.' He shook his head. 'Tommy, are you sure it's not just Florrie looking for attention again. You know what she's like? Wants to be the first in everything.'

'To be honest I think it's serious. It's not something you'd want to be first in is it? Dad had tears in his eyes when he was telling me how ill she was.'

'Did he come into the house?'

'No.'

Carrie breathed a sigh of relief. 'Thank God for that. Look, I'll come now. We can get the Tube. I'll leave my shopping with Dorothy and she can take it in her car. We'll go to Hanbury Street from here.'

Carrie went back to Dorothy to explain. She immediately handed Carrie her bags. 'We'll go in my car. It's waiting for us.'

'Dorothy, I don't expect...'

'I know you don't, but it sounds as though it's crucial you make good time. This will be much quicker than waiting for those damned

trains.' Dorothy had her chauffeur drop them off outside Arthur and Florrie's house. Carrie was ashamed to admit to herself she hadn't wanted Dorothy to see her old home, but Dorothy didn't bat an eyelid.

'I hope she's alright, darling,' she said through the rear passenger window. 'I'll drop your shopping off at Nightingale Lane. Let me know how she is. Stay in touch.'



INSIDE THE HOUSE EVERY curtain was closed and Carrie reflected that the odour that permeated the tiny front room was the sour smell of illness. Arthur had taken Carrie and Tommy into the room in silence, leaving the front door open so they could stand at a distance. He hadn't spoken since they'd arrived, simply nodded when he'd opened the door. Carrie and Tommy stood together, shoulder to shoulder, looking at Florrie lying on her back in a bed made up on the settee. Carrie swallowed the lump in her throat. She had never seen her mother look so emaciated. Her hair, usually a froth of blonde tied under a scarf lay flat to her scalp. The roots had grown through dark and Carrie realised that she had never known her mother was a brunette like her; had always thought she was blonde. So that was a lie too, she thought, and then admonished herself, telling herself it wasn't the time or place for such thoughts. Florrie's cheekbones were in sharp relief in her face, her complexion sallow and shiny with sweat. Around her eyes were dark smudges making them look deep in the sockets, the lids pulled so tight they were almost transparent.

Alfie, Florrie and Arthur's seventeen-year-old son was sitting on the end of the settee, tears rolling down his cheeks.

'I've been called up,' he said, 'but they said I could stay home until...' He looked over to the head of the bed where Florrie's face seemed so inert, so without its usual expressions of scorn or irritation. Carrie thought how much pleasanter she looked, even with the obvious signs of serious illness.

'She might be alright, Alfie,' she said to him. 'She might pull through. People do y'know.'

He shook his head, copious tears running down his face, the skin red raw and blotchy with crying. 'I know Mum. She's never been like this before, has she Dad?' He looked up at Arthur who morosely shook his head. 'She's never gone to bed 'cause she hasn't felt well and she's been like this for days. It was a cold at first but then it got worse and worse. The doctor gave her some stuff but it was useless. Cost us too. Dad had to fork out for it but it didn't do anything 'cept make her sick.'

'What did the doctor say, Dad,' Carrie asked him. She saw him

swallow before he could answer and she realised that he was utterly distraught at the possibility he would lose his wife, the woman who had tormented him for years and made his life hell, making him seem a much smaller man than he really was.

‘He said it was just a chill at first, but then he could see her getting worse. He advised us to keep her at home, said the hospitals wouldn’t want her because she was likely contagious. You don’t want to get too near. Alfie and I have been alright but don’t go any nearer to her. It’s bad enough her being like this, we don’t want anyone else getting it.’

‘But why has she caught it?’ asked Carrie. ‘I don’t know anyone else who has.’

‘She went to see that Dolores, Arnold Bateman’s mother, about two weeks ago. They’ve been friendly like, since you and Arnold... Anyway, they went into that pub on the corner of her street for a drink, what is it now, The Dog and Fox, something like that, a rough old dive it is, and it was full of soldiers on leave from the front. The doctor reckons she caught it there.’

Carrie looked sceptical. ‘Mum went into a pub? On her own?’

‘No, she was with Dolores Bateman.’

‘But she wasn’t with you, Dad. Why was she there with Arnold’s mother?’

‘How the ‘ell should I know? They just met up that’s all I know and now look at her.’

‘Has Dolores caught it?’

Arthur shrugged. ‘I don’t know and I don’t much care. Can’t stand her or her bloody son.’

‘He doesn’t care about her though, Dad. She might be alone and ill. She was kind to me, as kind as he would allow her to be. Someone needs to find out.’

‘Well, it isn’t going to be me. I’ve got enough to deal with.’

Carrie looked at Tommy who shrugged. ‘Let’s see what happens with Mum,’ he whispered. ‘She might get over this.’ She glanced at Florrie lying motionless in her bed, then glanced back at Tommy and shook her head. She heard him take a deep breath that wobbled in his chest. She knew how he felt, the maelstrom of feelings fighting for dominance in his brain and in his heart. That Florrie had been a cold mother was indisputable. That she’d often said cruel, unkind things could not be argued, but she was a human being and their mother, and it looked quite certain she was about to lose her life.

An hour later, Florrie Dobbs had gone.



CARRIE TOOK HER TIME as she walked down a street she thought

she'd never see again. Pratt Street in Camden, and the house where Dolores and Arnold Bateman lived. She had hoped Tommy would offer to visit Dolores, but when he said if he saw Arnold he wouldn't be responsible for his actions she decided to visit herself. Dolores hadn't been unkind to her, in fact, when Arnold had been at the pub with his mates she had taken Carrie under her wing. It was she who told Carrie that even though their marriage was an arrangement she would be expected to be a wife in every sense of the word, nodding her head to her to ensure Carrie knew what she meant. And Carrie had known. She remembered being filled with utter dread that when Arnold came back to the house with drink on him she would be expected to give him his conjugal rights. Yet he hadn't gone near her, complaining when she had got too close to what he said was his side of the bed. Their married life had never been consummated and it was then she realised that Dolores had no idea about her sons preferences or the other life he led, one where being in the army took young soldiers into his path.

She slowed as she got to number thirteen, apprehension rising in her chest as she was aware that it might not be Dolores who opened the door.

'I should have known,' she said to herself under her breath. 'When I saw that bloody number. Thirteen's never brought anyone any good.'

She knocked, noticing the peeling paint on the front door and that it was still held together with random pieces of wood nailed to keep the thing from collapsing all together. She waited a few moments then knocked again, praying that Arnold was no longer in London and that his leave was over. The door began to shift inwards, the sound of someone pulling the door with great effort.

'Push it can you?' cried a voice that was recognizably Dolores'. 'Put your shoulder against it otherwise we'll be talking through the door.' Carrie wondered if this wasn't for the best but she did as she was asked. The door opened abruptly with a crack revealing Dolores standing in the opening, her mouth dropping open when she saw Carrie. 'Oh? Carrie? You were the last person I expected to see.' She frowned as it dawned on her that her daughter-in-law was an unlikely visitor.

'I came to see how you are, Dolores. Florrie...Mum...has been ill with flu and I'm afraid she passed away yesterday. I know you and Mum saw each other a couple of weeks ago and I wanted to make sure you were alright. I didn't know if Arnold was here or in France.'

Dolores hand fluttered to her throat. 'Oh, my goodness, Carrie. I'm sorry, so sorry. Will you come in?'

Carrie shook her head. 'I'm sorry, Dolores. This is a flying visit. I have to go back to Hanbury Street and see to Dad. He's in bits about

losing Mum. As long as you're alright, that's all I came for.'

'Well, thank you for caring about me, Carrie. I'm still your mother-in-law aren't I, but why did you think I might have caught it?'

'The doctor reckoned Mum caught it when she was in the pub you went to.' Carrie lifted her chin to the pub at the corner of Pratt Street. 'She told Dad there were lots of soldiers in there that were on leave. When the doctor found out where she'd been he said he thought it had been brought over by soldiers who had caught it when they were in France. They might not have been ill with it but they'd passed it on.'

'And you think it's what happened to Florrie?'

Carrie shrugged. 'We can't be certain, Dolores, but it's an explanation. Florrie didn't really go anywhere apart from the market and she and Dad rarely had visitors at the house. S'pose the pub could have been where she caught it.'

Dolores nodded. 'I feel sad about Florrie. It's the one and only time I'd been in there. I know Arnold goes there when he's home but I'm not what you'd call a pub goer. I think we thought we were being adventurous. If only we'd known.'

Carrie inhaled. She had questioned Florrie and Dolores friendship. Florrie didn't like anyone much and rarely socialised.

'So you and Mum were friends then?'

'Of a sort. She said we had something in common what with you and Arnold being married...a bit like family. She asked about Arnold and when he was due home, that kind of thing. Just chitchat really. Nothing of any consequence.' Not for you, thought Carrie, but definitely something of consequence for Florrie. She was checking up on Arnold, that's why she'd befriended Dolores, trying to discover when she was safe and when she wasn't. Florrie knew that if Arnold was due home on leave she would need to batten down the hatches and be more aware of who she answered the door to. You never changed, did you Mum, she thought. Always covering your own back without a thought for anyone else. Not even your own daughter and her little son. 'And the funeral?' asked Dolores. 'Is it too early for a date?'

'It won't be until after Christmas, Dolores. You know how it is when it's so close to Christmas. It's so cold and more people are taken off because of it, 'specially the elderly. Funerals are always late this time of year.'

'You'll let me know, Carrie? I'd like to pay my respects to your family.'

Carrie nodded and smiled benignly at Dolores. 'Yes, of course. I'll send a message. I hope you have a peaceful Christmas, Dolores.'

'And to you, Carrie.' Then Dolores chuckled looking dubious. 'I think the peace in this house very much depends on whether my son's

home or not.'

'Don't you know if he'll be here for Christmas?'

Dolores shook her head. 'Well, I thought he was going back to the front before Christmas but I know he didn't go. He'd mentioned training for his new job, but I'm not sure. There must be a reason I s'pose, but he's not been staying here for the last couple of weeks. That boy never told me anything, and he still doesn't.'



BACK AT HANBURY STREET Carrie set about cleaning the house with a zeal that she hadn't felt in a long time. Florrie had been taken to the undertakers and it concerned her that the illness that had taken her off would infect Arthur, and also Alfie who had taken to his bed since Florrie had died and not been seen since. She knew better than to try and coax him out of his room, that he needed to confront his grief at the loss of his mother in his own way. She was also terrified that her little brother had been called up to fight. It was what he'd wanted, at least it was what he'd said he'd wanted, but she'd always thought he wanted it because he thought he was meant to and didn't want people to think he wasn't up to it. Florrie had babied him, the only one of her four children for whom she seemed to have an affection. Perhaps that was the point. He was the youngest and she knew she wouldn't have another.

It took Carrie the rest of the day and half of the next to feel satisfied that the house was free of germs. She'd worn a scarf over her hair and one over her nose and mouth because she was worried that something unseen could be lurking in the curtains or behind the beds that could wriggle into the pores of her scalp or seep into her nose and mouth. She realised that for all her bluster and negativity Florrie was a clean woman. There was little dust to be seen, only a fine layer which had fallen in the days she had been ill, and the small range was scrubbed and blacked and not been used since.

'Must have done it before she got ill,' murmured Carrie under her breath. 'Only the good Lord knows what Dad and Alfie have been eating for the last couple of weeks.' She stopped in her tracks. 'What have they been eating?' She tutted and shook her head. 'Bet it was bread and cheese and a pint down the pub. Well that can't go on forever.'

She waited upstairs in the bedroom for Arthur to get back from his job unloading the few boats that came into the docks, heard him open the back door, a hacking cough wracking his chest as he shrugged out of his overcoat, one he'd worn every winter for twenty years, and held his hands in front of the fire she'd made.

'Dad?'

'Jesus, Carrie, you gave me a start. What you doin' 'ere?'

'I want to know what's going to happen now, with you and Alfie I mean, now Mum's gone.'

He frowned and shook his head and she saw his hands shake as he held them out to the fire. He shook with the cold and she knew the work he did was too much for him, yet without it they would have had nothing. She shut her eyes for a moment to stop the tears from leaving the rim of her eyes where they welled in droplets threatening to roll down her cheeks. Her dad was a quiet, lovely man who had suffered over the years because of the poverty they had been forced to endure and she grieved for him even more than she did for Florrie who seemed to have brought him little in the way of comfort or affection.

'I don't know what you're talkin' about, our Carrie. What do you mean, what's going to happen? Nothing's goin' to happen. Alfie will go off to war because he's been called up and I'll just get on with it, like most other people are in this terrible time. What else can I do?'

'You can come with me to Nightingale Lane. We've got room. The refugees will likely be going home to Belgium after Christmas and you and Alfie can have the attic flat. It's lovely up there now Tommy's painted it and Ida and I have furnished it really nice. Please, Dad. Come home with me.'

'Oh, now, Carrie, don't take on.' He turned from the fire and sat in the old kitchen chair, pulling on his slippers that had holes where his big toes poked through. 'This is my home, mine and your mother's. I've lived here all my married life. Why would I want to leave the place where all my memories of her are?'

'Because you're getting older, Dad, and because...it'll mean I won't worry about you being on your own. You've never lived alone, have you? Mum's always been here. She did the cooking and the cleaning. And how are you going to keep that up as well as going to work?' Arthur said nothing. 'So, you and Alfie...what have you been eating since Mum was ill?' Arthur raised his eyes to look at her then stared into the fire. 'I looked in the cupboard, Dad. There's not enough there to keep a flea alive, let alone two grown men. You can't go to the pub and eat there every day, that'll kill you stone dead within a fortnight.'

'I know 'ow to cook. I'm not daft.'

She sat in the old chair opposite his and put a hand on his resting on his knee. She felt the coarse wrinkled skin under her palm, the callouses on his thumb, the scratches and cuts from lifting and stacking wooden crates, the splinters ingrained in his flesh. 'You're the undaftest man I've ever known.'

He raised a little smile when he heard her say that. 'I haven't

heard that in a while. Undaft. That was one of your mother's funny words.' His voice broke and he collapsed in the chair, silent sobs wracking his body. 'What will I do? What will I do?'

Carrie leant forward and put her arms around him, holding him while he cried. She could hardly believe what had happened. She had always imagined Florrie outliving them all, her domineering personality and unforgiving nature fending off any illness that would break an easier-going person, but here she was, comforting her father who was reeling from the loss of the woman who had been the author of all their lives.

'Look, Dad. I understand what you're saying, and there's no hurry. I'm not me mother and I won't push you into doing something you're not comfortable with, but I'd like you to just think about it. Me and Tommy talked about it last night and I know he and Pearl would love it if you came to us. You've got grandkids there who need you.'

He looked up then, his face blotchy from crying, and stared unblinking at her. 'Why do they need me?'

'Because you're their only grandad. Grandad's have magical powers that parents don't have, you know that. It's time John got to know you and you to know him. And then there's little Eliza. She needs you too.'

'Who?'

Carrie frowned. 'Eliza. Tommy and Pearl's little girl, born premature. Did you not know?' He shook his head and it dawned on them both that this was something else that Florrie had kept from him. 'Pearl was taken bad so they took her in to the hospital in Poplar and delivered Eliza early. Pearl's at home now, still recovering, and Eliza's being cared for at the hospital until she's strong enough to come home.'

'I just don't understand how you'll have room for everyone in that house. You make it sound never-ending.'

Carrie chuckled. 'D'you know, Dad, it almost has been. The thing is you've never visited. You don't know what it's like and you're my dad. If anyone should know you should.'

He nodded. 'I'm sorry, Carrie, for the way things turned out.'

She hugged him to her. 'They turned out fine, in the end, but I've missed you, Dad. Tommy misses you too. He needs his Dad around him. He might be a husband and father but he's still young. He's always looked up to you.'

'I dunno why. I was never allowed to be meself.' He smiled and Carrie knew he bore no malice against Florrie for her domineering him.

'Will you think about it? Please?'

He looked around the sparse front room, the shabby furniture, the

faded curtains, and moth-eaten rugs and nodded. 'But what would happen to this place?'

Carrie shrugged. 'Another family can make their own memories here, like we did. You'll bring yours with you and we'll join them together with ours. We can reminisce until the cows come home.'

'You got cows in that garden of yours?'

She smiled broadly and he returned it. 'Will you think about it then?' she asked him squeezing his hand.

He nodded. 'I will, Carrie. I'll think about it.'



Chapter 58



THE WORLD SEEMED A different place from the one Carrie knew as she watched the flames leap up the chimney in her sitting room. It was as though she was in a dream, that what had just happened hadn't really, and that soon she would wake up and everything would be as it was. That Florrie had died had hit her harder than she ever thought possible. How many times had Carrie cursed her mother for what she'd put her through, for the way she'd treated Tommy and for the life she had led Arthur, yet here she was, morose, tearful, and feeling wretched, and she knew what she was feeling was the grief of the bereaved.

She'd never understood Florrie and Florrie had never understood her. That alone had been the biggest problem between them. Carrie was like Arthur but with a harder centre. For her, complying with Florrie's ethos on life would have been totally wrong and it was why they had never agreed on anything, even when she was little. Florrie had favoured Carrie's sister, Elsie at first, her blonde blue-eyed girl with the perfect skin who could do no wrong until she met Len West whom Florrie thought she could mould like she did everyone else, but Len had had other ideas. Instead, he had taken her money, the money she had received from Arnold Bateman, money that hadn't done anyone any good, least of all Carrie, who was still paying the price for Florrie's deceit. Florrie had shifted her favouritism onto Alfie, Florrie and Arthur's youngest son, yet Carrie knew it was a favouritism no one would want. It was Florrie's way of moulding the boy to her whims and wishes. That Alfie had been the only one to cry at her bedside had been telling, and she wondered how he would be now that her guiding hand was no longer with him. He would need to grow up fast. He'd been called up to fight and it would make a man of him, and as terrified as she was for him she thought it might be the one thing that would turn him around and allow him to be his own person instead of Florrie's puppet...and at times, her whipping boy.

Carrie rose wearily and went into her bedroom where she lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Around her was everything she had

chosen with David in mind. She'd wanted the room feminine with a classic edge so that David didn't think he was entering a boudoir. He was masculine in his outlook, his role in the army was important to him, and she'd wanted the room to be for both of them, for their shared, private moments that only they knew. When he was missing in action everything she had done had been with David in her thoughts and in her heart, her prayers beseeching whoever was listening to return him to her.

She lay her hand flat against the eiderdown on the other side of the bed and imagined him there, laying with her on the softness. She turned onto her side and closed her eyes, picturing his face, his soulful eyes like brown velvet, the long dark lashes, the smattering of freckles across his nose, and the kind, generous mouth and almost sculptured chin. He was a handsome man, even when he had returned to her in Nightingale Lane he was still attractive, his need for her had almost made him more so, but the sharpness had been softened by his experiences, the eyes had lost their bright alertness, the full lips had become a morose straight line and his nature...his nature had been soured by the hatred he felt for the enemy in France where his men had been slaughtered. Was he lost to her? Completely lost to her?

She woke some hours later. The fire in the sitting room had burnt down to a hissing glow and in that strange place between sleep and awake she thought she'd heard a noise from John's room.

Reaching for the clock on the dresser she realised she'd slept through the evening rounds. Training Hannah and Alitza to take over for a few hours had been one of the best decisions she'd made, and she knew that with Ida's help they would easily provide the care she usually gave the soldiers who came to Nightingale Lane for convalescence. All that was left to do was the evening morphine dosages which only Carrie was permitted to deliver.

She swung her legs off the bed and pushed the joining door into John's bedroom a little wider. He'd spent much of the day at Dorothy's with Dotty and Seraphina's tutor and had been exhausted when he'd returned home. He was only two and a half, still a baby really, yet she felt safe knowing he slept in the room next to hers. She'd expected him to be a soft mound in his bed, snoring gently with his thumb half in his mouth, but he was kneeling up on the window seat looking out of the window, a curtain drawn aside to reveal the night sky.

'John, sweetheart, what are you doing? Why aren't you in bed?'

'It's that man again,' he said without turning to her and pressing his nose against the glass. 'It's the man from before.'

Carrie's blood ran cold and she went across to the window and looked out onto the street. There were no streetlights because of the

blackout, but someone had painted the top half of a porchlight with black paint so just the bottom half gave out an eerie half-light that puddled on the ground. It had been snowing again, heavier this time, and even with no lighting it made it possible to see the dark smudges of leafless trees that lined the street, the pavement kerb edge where the snow had become slushy with footfall, and the attic windows in the houses opposite from where muted light had been allowed to escape through the leaded lights.

‘What man, John? Were you dreaming?’

‘No, Mama. John not dreaming.’ He pointed to the other side of the street. ‘The man was there. The man from before.’

Carrie pulled John gently away from the window and let the curtain fall back into place.

‘The man from before? Can you tell me, John? Who is it?’

He frowned and shook his head. ‘He wore a hat.’

Carrie inhaled deeply, acknowledging to herself that to question John too closely would do more harm than good. She picked him up and laid him on his bed, pulling the covers across him and tucking him in.

‘It was just a little dream, sweetheart. Nothing to worry about. I think you should go back to sleep now. It’ll soon be Christmas and we have lots to do tomorrow.’ She smoothed his curls back from his forehead and glanced back at the window. Someone had been in the street opposite the house. It could have been perfectly innocent but anxiety flooded through her when she thought of who it might be. Arnold said he would take whatever she wasn’t prepared to give him, and he knew the way to hurt her was to hurt John. Dolores had told her he was meant to be in France, yet wasn’t sure, and he had friends, people like him who would do anything for money. She swallowed as nausea threatened to overwhelm her, but she felt sure this had been a warning, one she could not ignore.

‘Who was it?’ asked Ida as Carrie prepared the morphine doses. ‘Do you think John knew him?’

‘He said it was the man from before. He’s so little, Ida. How can I question him? It could have been anyone.’

‘Who could have been anyone?’ Tommy came into the kitchen with Joshka, just returned from a late evening shift at Silver Town. They were covered in brick dust and still wearing their work boots.

‘Will you get out of my kitchen please?’ cried Ida, looking cross. ‘Look at all that muck. Tommy, you know the rules. Get clean before you come in here. There’s food about.’

‘Yeah, sorry,’ said Tommy, looking contrite. He lifted his chin to Joshka. ‘We’d better leave before Ida blows a gasket.’

‘I don’t have gaskets to blow, but I won’t have brick dust in my

kitchen. D'you hear?'

Tommy held up his hand, a grin across his face. 'We're gone. We're going,' he said, moving towards the kitchen door then leaning in towards Carrie. 'But who could have been anyone?'

Carrie followed him out into the hall and leaned against the wood panelling. 'Whoever it was standing outside John's bedroom window.'

'What?'

'He said it was the man from before.' She shook her head, her face etched with anxiety. 'I'm scared, Tommy. Arnold said he would take whatever I wouldn't give him.'

'But he doesn't want John, does he?'

'No, but he knows how to get to me. The thing is I went to see Dolores yesterday and she told me he was due back in France but she didn't think he went. I don't know why that would be unless her story about training is true. I know he's been promoted, maybe that's why he hasn't gone yet.'

'But you're worried if he did it could be someone he's asked to stand outside on his behalf.' Tommy's lips formed a straight line and drew in a breath. 'Can't hurt you though, can he? Whoever it is. He can stand outside as much as he wants. He's just trying to put the willies up you. It's what he does.'

'You know what kind of man he is. He cares about no one but himself. His own mother said as much and I think he's desperate. He says he'll go to law to get what he wants but he'll try intimidation and bullying first because he's frightened of what I might say about him. This kind of scaremongering would be typical of Arnold. He's a horrible man.'

'Don't I know it.' Tommy looked thoughtful. 'Have you thought about reporting him to his regiment? What about Marcus. Can't he do something about him?'

She nodded. 'I have thought about it, but if I scupper his career in his beloved army there's no telling what he would do. And as for Marcus, I'm not sure I want to ask him to get involved, at least not before I've tried something else.'

'Which is?'

'Offering Arnold money.'

Tommy turned away in frustration. 'No, Carrie. Don't give him anything. Why the hell should he have it?'

'Because I want him to leave me alone and it's all I've got to give him, apart from a share of the house which he thinks he's entitled to, and if I had to part with half of it, it would break my heart.'

'So if you give him money it's going to have to be enough to satisfy him. You could be talking...' Tommy blew out a breath. 'God, Carrie, I don't know. Surely, you don't have that kind of money.'

‘No, but I’d have to get it.’

He looked aghast. ‘A moneylender?’

She nodded. ‘I’ve got some money saved. It’s not a fortune but if I use that as well it might just be enough.’

‘Until he comes back for another cut.’

‘It might be a risk I’ll have to be prepared to take.’

‘Have you washed yourself yet, Tommy?’ Ida called from the kitchen. ‘Don’t be dropping all that dust all over my nice clean floor.’

Tommy rolled his eyes. ‘I’d better go. I want to try and organise a visit for Pearl with the hospital in Poplar to see Eliza. I think she’s ready for it and I want her to see the progress Eliza’s made.’

‘She’s doing well isn’t she?’

A broad smile transformed his face. ‘She really is. She’s a tough little thing, like her mum.’ He put a hand on Carrie’s shoulder. ‘Don’t give in to Bateman, Carrie. He’s no better than a cheap crook and if you give him anything he’ll just expect more and more. It’s a dangerous road to go down.’



TWO DAYS LATER, AND four days before Christmas Day, Carrie received news that the Belgian refugees she had taken in would be returning to their homeland. She had been expecting that her families would want to leave sooner rather than later, many had already been repatriated when the front had been made relatively secure for returnees. She knew that for them this was wonderful news. They would be given assistance to return to their homes and she could only imagine how they had felt when they had had to leave everything they knew and loved in a great hurry, with little opportunity to take even a change of clothing with them.

She told Hannah, Benjamin, and their daughters first. They were elated that they would be going home, Rebekah and Lila held hands and jumped up and down, ecstatic that they would be seeing their friends again, and Hannah threw her arms around Benjamin then Carrie.

‘Thank you, Carrie. Thank you for telling us. We have been waiting for the news. Some of us have returned already, but as Jews...we waited, yes?’

‘You will still be here over Christmas, Hannah. I don’t know if you want to join us in our celebrations. Many of our soldiers will be well enough to go home to their families until they are called up to fight again, so there won’t be as many of us, just the family and Ida, of course. We’ll have dinner during the afternoon which Ida will want to cook. I hope you will join us... I hope all of you will want to join us.’

Benjamin nodded and Hannah's smile didn't leave her face. 'A last meal together. Yes. What a journey we have been on since we left our village near Namen. I can't believe we will see it again. I thought we would not see it again.'

Carrie reached for her hand, a friend to a friend. 'You've never told us, Hannah, or Alitza and Gregor or Joshka. You've never...confided...told us what happened.'

Hannah sat on the bed and encouraged Carrie to sit beside her. Benjamin and the girls sat on cushions on the floor as Hannah spoke, haltingly, her voice laced with emotion as she recalled the fear they had felt when they'd left their home.

'We had to leave. Many had already been killed. When we got to the road leading out of the village our neighbours were there. People, people, walking for their lives. We were all...' She fluttered her hands out in front of her. 'All went to different places, to France, to England, to the Netherlands. Our family, aunts, uncles, we live in the same village. We don't know where they are. We were so frightened. Old people die by the road, sick people die on the way to England. Children too. So tired. So much walking. We were all so sad...to leave our homes. To leave each other. We did not know where we would go. We did not know we would come here, to you, Carrie. Many people not so lucky. Some children without their parents. We worry what will happen to them.' She looked at the girls and they got up from their place on the floor where they had sat quietly listening to their mother, and ran to her, throwing their arms around her. 'Benjamin and I are lucky to have Rebekah and Lila with us, but my parents?' She shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'You don't know where your parents are?'

'No. We think maybe The Netherlands. We were separated. My father walk very slow. They told us to take the girls and get away quickly. We didn't want to leave them, but they said to go.'

'I'm so sorry, Hannah. They might already be back home in your village.'

Hannah nodded. 'Yes. We hope. We pray.'

'I'll pray too. We'll think about them during Christmas. My friend, Dorothy, Mrs Tremaine, might be able to find something out about your parents. Write their names on some paper and I'll ask her to enquire for you.'

Hannah squeezed Carrie's hand and smiled. 'Thank you, Carrie. You are good friend. Alitza and I will never forget you and Ida, for helping us, for making us welcome in your home.'

When Carrie closed the door to Hannah and Benjamin's room tears pricked her eyes and she felt humbled. She wondered how they had survived all they'd been through, how they had endured the walk

across Belgium and witness such heartbreak without it changing who they were, without it making them bitter and vengeful. They had been strong; their children had depended on them to find a place of safety for them, and Carrie recognized that a strong will, a strength of character, and the desire to provide a safe haven for your child will galvanise a parent to do everything they could to protect that child, even if it meant putting oneself in danger. The child was the most important person, the one who mattered the most.

John, her John, the little boy who had brought her so much joy. She would do all in her power to make sure his future was secure, ensure that 99 Nightingale Lane would always be his home. It was where he belonged after all. It was the house where his father was born and lived, the house for which Carrie had worked and had bought so that she and her family could live in safety, and where they could provide a safe haven for others. She would never let anyone take it from them.

‘Over my dead body,’ she said under her breath.



Chapter 59



CARRIE TRIED TO MAKE the following days after Florrie's death as routine as she could, as much for her own sake as anyone else's. John had sensed that Carrie had been upset by something because he insisted on climbing onto her lap and putting his arms around her neck.

'Mama?' he'd whisper to get her attention, his breath warm against her ear and her hair. It was as if he were asking her the question, why? Why was she so quiet and seemingly so far away? Why were she and Tommy constantly talking quietly about someone called Arthur, and why were they always mentioning what would happen "after Christmas" when they hadn't even opened their Christmas presents yet.

Carrie always had a smile for him, but the change in her family dynamic had affected her. The strongest character hadn't proved to be so, and she thought there was no rhyme or reason to it. It challenged her belief system, the one that had told her the strongest always survives, the stoutest, the most formidable, the fiercest, yet here they were, confronting the death of the most hard-headed of them all. She had thought about it a great deal and considered that it was perhaps Florrie's inflexibility that had caught her off-guard. She would never bend to anyone else's will, was brittle in her approach to other people, exacting to the last degree and deeply antagonistic.

Carrie administered her duties as though on automatic, the routines and necessary practises so ingrained in her she could have dispensed them in her sleep. And Florrie's death wasn't the only thing that occupied her thoughts. When her mind went to the man standing on the pavement opposite the house her limbs and torso would quiver with anxiety making her legs turn to jelly. She had tried to apply some loose logic to it, unconvincing she knew, but a possibility that it was no one in particular, that John had got it wrong and it was someone he thought he knew. That the man waiting in the street was wearing a hat gave no clue. Men wore hats. She had also considered showing John photographs but realised that she did not possess one

photograph of the man she was convinced was watching the house, and if he had organised someone else to intimidate her, they wouldn't know who it was so a photograph would be useless.

She wondered what the next step would be, whether he would try and get into the house, or whether he would accost her on the street. What did criminals do when they were trying to extort something out of someone? And this was how she thought of Arnold Bateman, she realised it now; as a criminal, not because of the way he wanted to live his life; she had learnt over the years that everyone was different and even if the law was not on his side she felt everyone should have a choice. It was because of his disrespect for others; for Carrie whom he'd married under false pretences and used violence to get her to do his bidding, for his mother who was a good woman, and even the young men he coerced into his way of thinking. How much choice had he given Carrie when he'd laid a fist on her and left her senseless, sprawled on the floor of the veranda at the bungalow in Secunderabad? How much choice did his mother have that she had suffered under the fists of his father and been forced to raise a son in his image and in his philosophy that women were no better than slaves? And how much choice did the young men he should have been training to be good soldiers have when they perhaps thought that not to comply with Arnold's wishes would mean an unbearable life in the ranks.

The following two nights after Florrie's death and when John had alerted Carrie to the man in the street she had stood silently by the window in his bedroom after putting John to bed, the curtain pushed slightly away from the window frame so that she could clearly see the pavement opposite the house, and waited, and watched.

She had marvelled at how her eyes became used to the gloom outside the window, how different everything looked when there was nothing to light the street. There was a permanent blackout. No streetlamps shone from the beautiful wrought iron lamps that lined Nightingale Lane, or from the intricate porch lamps that every house had at its entrance. Curtains had to be drawn to block out the light from the windows. Any bending of the rules was reported immediately and the penalty was not just a fine, but derision from those who thought that anyone selfish enough not to adhere to the instructions the government had given the people of Great Britain could not possibly care about the war effort and the young men sent to fight.

Some had painted their porch lamps so that any pale light emanating from them showed only the steps in front of their house, and did not flood the pavement. This was of no help to Carrie, but the snow that had fallen constantly for the previous two days did help, and she wondered if it was that very thing that had prevented the

man, whoever he was, from continuing his watch on the house. He wanted to be seen, but not by her. Was it only John he was interested in?

She shuddered and gave up her surveillance, glancing into her bedroom and the clock on the bedside table. Eleven-thirty. She hadn't realised how long she had waited. Sighing, she pulled the curtain tight across the window. She still had her duty to the soldiers and staying up all night was out of the question. She made for the door but something made her turn and put her hand to the corner, drawing it slightly aside for one last look. She drew in a breath and felt her skin go hot. A movement, in the shadows of the houses opposite. There was someone there she was sure of it.

She let the curtain fall again and took deep breaths to compose herself. I must know who it is, she thought, because until then I won't know what to do. She took another breath then drew the curtain slightly aside. A curl of smoke gave whoever it was away, then an increasing orange glow as someone pulled deeply on a cigarette. Carrie hardly breathed, frightened to allow her body to move in case it alerted them that she was there.

She waited. After a few minutes, a cigarette stub was thrown onto the pavement where she saw it glow brightly for a moment, then become extinguished by the snow. She swallowed again and levelled her breath. I will know who you are, she thought. I have to.

Suddenly, the light in the porch of the house opposite was illuminated. Just the bottom half could be seen where the top had been painted with black paint, but it threw enough light into the porch to show an outline of a man, a man wearing an army overcoat and a peaked cap. The shadows the porchlight cast sharpened the contours of his face, the wide-set eyes, the jaw resolute, the lips unsmiling now, yet generous.

She leant back a little, her mouth dropping open in surprise. She didn't want him to see her; didn't want him to know he had been discovered in case it frightened him into believing he could not return. David Lawrence. Standing opposite her home, hiding in the shadows was David Lawrence, the man she had never stopped loving or wanting, the person for whom she waited and would continue to wait until he needed her again, needed her enough for him to realise he could always come back into her life.

She pressed her lips together to prevent her instinct to cry out to him from taking over. Tears flooded her eyes and she stepped away from the window to brush them away, wanting nothing to mar her vision. She wanted to see him, all of him. She wanted to hold him, to touch him, to talk with him as they had when he was well. She needed him so badly, and it was only now that she could admit to herself that

her need for him had weakened her because she knew there was no way for her to reason with him. The decision had to be made by him and he alone. There was nothing more she could do. She inhaled again and leant forward, pulling the curtain aside just an inch or so. She needed one last look at him before he left to return to wherever it was he now made his home.

The pavement opposite the house was cast in shadow. The porchlight had been extinguished and darkness prevailed once more. There was no curl of smoke, no miniscule orange glow from a lighted cigarette, and no one hiding in the shadows. David Lawrence had gone.



‘DARLING, ARE YOU SURE, absolutely sure?’

Carrie nodded. ‘It was him, Dorothy. I’d know him anywhere.’ She had taken John to Dorothy’s to be included in Dotty and Seraphina’s music lesson because she wanted everything to remain the same for him. There had been so many changes in such a short space of time that it concerned her he might become unsettled. It was nearly Christmas, just two days away, the first Christmas he would have any knowledge of and she wanted nothing to spoil it.

Dorothy raised her glass to her lips and sipped her gin fizz, encouraging Carrie to do the same. ‘So what will you do? Do you think he’s still at the Alexandria?’

‘I’m thinking he isn’t but I don’t know for sure. The only way for me to know is to ask for him there.’

‘They might not tell you. If he has forbidden them to give out information on his behalf they won’t divulge his whereabouts.’

‘To be honest I’m not expecting them to tell me where he is, but I’m hoping they’ll take pity on me and let me know if he’s still at the nursing home or not. At least then I’ll know that he’s either been discharged or he discharged himself and they sanctioned it. It will mean he’s staying somewhere else. For the time being I would be happy to know just that.’

‘He still loves you, doesn’t he?’

Carrie ran her hands over her face. She’d cried when she’d discovered it was David watching the house and the discovery had brought with it a new set of emotions that she was struggling to contain. Sleep eluded her still. She had always believed a good night’s sleep would help mend many things, and Ida Coyle believed in the benefits of sleep wholeheartedly, but finding that sleep, allowing her body and mind to let go and lose the worries that beset her was almost impossible.

‘I never doubted his love for me, Dorothy. Through all of this I could never believe that David had lost his love for me. We meant so much to each other, had made so many promises to each other. He risked his position in the army, his reputation and the respect of his men and his seniors, so we could be together. Arnold could have ruined him, and if I hadn’t known about him and the life he led he almost certainly would have. It was still a risk because we can never be sure what someone is capable of when they’re out to get revenge, especially someone like Arnold. David was Arnold’s Captain and Arnold and I were married,’ a frown knotted her eyebrows, ‘such as it was.’ She nodded, as much to herself as to Dorothy. ‘Yes, he took a risk and he did it because he loved me.’

Sadness crossed Dorothy’s face as she acknowledged her friends loyalty and undying love for David Lawrence, a man who had all but cast her aside. ‘Is he the same man, darling? Do you think it’s possible that David will come back to himself, to return to the life he knew, to the love you shared?’

‘I have to believe it, don’t I? I must believe it. I still love him with all my heart. No other man will ever take his place. Apart from my sweet John he is everything to me and I will wait. I’ll wait for him until he’s ready to make that decision. What if it was Marcus? You adore him, don’t you?’

Dorothy smiled and leant her head to one side, her husband appearing in her mind’s eye. ‘Oh, I do.’ She nodded. ‘Yes, I adore him. He is kindness and understanding and loyalty wrapped up in one man.’ She reached for Carrie’s hand. ‘I know how lucky I am, Carrie. Believe me, I know I can be a bit brash sometimes and I like to have my own way, everyone knows that about me, but the good Lord smiled on me the day he sent Marcus Tremaine into my path. From the very first time I saw him I knew, I knew he was the one and he always says he felt the same. My sister, Naomi said the room crackled when we stood next to each other. We were meant to be together, and we feel strongly that Violet and Sebastian are the visible proof of that love. We made them together. Yes, I know I’m lucky, darling.’

Carrie squeezed her hand. ‘I knew you’d understand, Dorothy. We may have been brought up in different worlds but we’re very much the same. Love is all, isn’t it? The path that David and I have walked has been different from yours and Marcus’. Ours has been strewn with rocks, still is, and I don’t know what will happen, but I love him enough to want to find out. If he cannot find it in his heart to continue our life together, to build on the love we have, I will have to accept his decision.’

‘It will break your heart.’

‘I think my heart is already broken, Dorothy. I’m hoping that David

will find the courage to mend it.'



THAT EVENING, CARRIE joined Tommy in his and Pearl's sitting room to talk about Arthur. John sat on the rug in front of the fire playing with a wooden trainset.

'Have you asked him?' Tommy asked her. 'Does he know we want him to come here?'

'He knows but I'm worried about him, Tommy.' She sighed and rubbed her fingers across her eyes. 'There just seems to be so much to think about.'

'There's no thinking about it. If he doesn't want to live here he won't. I reckon he can be stubborn too y'know. It wasn't just Florrie who knew how to dig her heels in.'

'But he and Alfie aren't eating properly. They had nothing in the cupboard apart from a jar of onions mum had pickled last Christmas and a knob of bread that was so old it had gone hard. What are they living on for God's sake?'

Tommy shrugged. 'Well, I know what I'd do.'

Pearl chuckled. 'Yeah, we know what you'd do too. The pub isn't always the answer. The food they serve there would see you off if nothing else did, and they've had illness in their house. Don't they need feeding up? Alfie's going to the front at the beginning of the year. He won't last five minutes without some good food inside him. They need to come here.'

'Bloody hell, are you two ganging up on me. I'm not disagreeing with you. Yeah, they need to come here but not by sticking their arms up their backs. It don't work like that. They're their own men. If Dad wants to come here he'll come. You can't force him.'

Carrie shook her head in frustration. 'Why am I always waiting for someone to do something?'

'It's life. People don't always do what you expect them to do.'

'Ain't that the truth.' Tommy stared at her and she blinked at him. 'What?'

'I hear it was David who was outside the house that night.'

'Who told you? Oh, well, it must have been Ida.' He nodded and raised his eyebrows. 'I don't know why you're looking at me like that. There's nothing I can do.'

'Why don't you run outside and drag him in. Let him know how much you want him here?'

Pearl chuckled again. 'There you go again, Tommy Dobbs. Mr Sensitivity. Do you really think that would work after everything that's happened?'

‘It was just a thought.’

‘Yeah, well it was a daft one.’

The knocker clanging against the front door made them jump and Carrie laughed.

‘We’re all on pins. What’s wrong with us?’

‘Er, we’re in the middle of a war.’

‘So who do you think this is then,’ Carrie said with a grin on her face. ‘The Bosch?’

‘Might be. I’ll get me gun.’

‘Yeah, you do that.’

Pearl and Tommy waited for Carrie to return. When she joined them again the expression on her face told her it wasn’t a German soldier at the door.

‘We’ve got a visitor.’

Someone pushed past Carrie nearly knocking her off her feet. ‘So were you ever going to tell me about Mum? Obviously not ‘cause I heard about her passing down at the pub. Some brother and sister you turned out to be.’

Tommy’s eyes widened and Carrie looked away. ‘Elsie,’ he cried. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘What the bloody hell do you think I’m doin’ here? Me Ma’s dead and no one thought to tell me, her eldest and the one she was closest to. I bet you didn’t give me a second thought did you? Thanks a bunch.’

‘Why don’t you take the weight off your feet, Elsie,’ said Pearl, ‘and you might want to think before you speak. There’s a little boy sitting over there. Please don’t swear.’

‘Oh, bl... What have we all turned into, eh? La di da I suppose now you’re living here.’ She lifted her chin to John. ‘I s’pose he’s Johan Stern’s bastard isn’t he.’

‘Right,’ said Carrie, ‘that’s enough. You either watch your language, Elsie or you’re out on your ear, sister or no sister, d’you hear me.’

‘I don’t know why you’re so up yourself, Carrie. At least Rose’s mum and dad are married.’

Carrie crossed her arms in front of her chest and stared hard at Elsie. ‘Oh, is that right. And where is he, that husband of yours?’

Elsie’s face took on a sulky look. ‘Away on business.’

‘Business is it? And how is business these days?’

‘He’s doing alright.’

‘The last I heard he’d been in a punch up at the pub and the police got involved. Spent a few days at His Majesty’s Pleasure, didn’t he? How come he’s not in France?’

‘His eyesight’s bad, and Len can’t help it if people are jealous of

him. People don't like it when you're doing well. He's a businessman. It's what people don't like and they think they can say what they like about it,' she glared at Carrie, 'even when it's got nothing to do with them.'

Carrie could feel her anger rising and she was worried to ask the next question.

'Where's Rose tonight?'

Elsie sniffed then wiped her nose on the back of her hand. 'At the flat. She's alright.'

'On her own?'

Elsie glared at Carrie. 'I said she's alright, didn't I? Anyway, I know what you're doing, you're trying to change the subject. I come here about Mum and why I wasn't informed. Of her passing, I mean. I can't believe you didn't even try to find me to tell me. I'm very hurt. I'm still part of this family whether you like it or not.'

Carrie went across to John and took him by the hand.

'Shall we get you into bed, John. It's getting late, sweetheart.'

'Can't I stay up because we've got visitors?'

Carrie smiled. 'Not tonight. And we've only got two more night-times and then Father Christmas will come.'

'I'd better be a good boy, then. Auntie Ida said.'

'Auntie Ida's right.'

When Carrie returned to Pearl and Tommy's sitting room Elsie had made herself comfortable on the sofa in front of the fire, a big glass of amber-coloured whiskey in her hand of which she took liberal gulps, wiping her mouth on her sleeve and leaving smears of bright red lipstick on her shabby coat.

'Ooh, that's good,' she said, pressing her lips together to savour the alcohol. 'They don't sell whiskey like this down at the pub. Just the crap stuff that would take paint off a door. Christ knows what it's doing to our insides.'

'Maybe it would be best not to drink it then,' said Tommy, his face hard with disappointment.

'Yeah, that's right, Tommy. It's alright for you though isn't it, living here with Madam Bountiful. You've really fallen on your feet haven't you?' She gave him a steely glare then glanced at Pearl. 'And you, Pearl, you living here now?'

'Pearl and Tommy are married, Elsie, and they work here, not that it's any of your business,' said Carrie. 'Now, what do you want?'

Pearl turned in her seat, her eyes bright with alcohol. 'Why are you talking to me like that? I'm your sister, not that anyone would know it. Our mum has passed and you didn't even have the decency to let me know and you're talking to me like I don't matter.' She slammed the glass down on the side table, spilling what was left of the whiskey

over her hand. 'She was my mother!' she cried, then began to sob. 'The only one I'll ever have. I know she was difficult, but I loved her,' she growled at them, her teeth bared, 'which was more than you two ungrateful wretches. You couldn't have cared less. And you couldn't care less about me and Rose, neither.'

Carrie shook her head at Elsie's histrionics. This was usual behaviour for Elsie when she didn't get her own way in anything but Carrie had hoped she'd grown out of it. 'For a start, we didn't know where you were living, Elsie, so you can get off your high horse about that, and from what I hear you don't even respect yourself let alone anyone else,' said Carrie, the sympathy she had begun to feel for Elsie swiftly deserting her. 'That businessman husband of yours has led you into quite a life, hasn't he? And I'll thank you to keep your voice down. We have soldiers here who are convalescing and they need peace and quiet, not some loud-mouthed fishwife screaming at the top of her voice.'

Elsie picked up the glass from the table and drained it, placing it back on the table. 'Well I'm sorry, aren't I? I didn't know you had sick men here. Any of 'em want a bit of fun? I've met some of these soldiers. They like a bit of how's your father.' She looked around the room then at Carrie, Tommy and Pearl. 'This place could be a nice little earner for me,' she said, grinning.

Carrie stood.

'Out!'

Elsie stared at her. 'What?'

'I said, out. This is a convalescence home not a bloody knocking shop. Go on Elsie, pick up your skirts and get out of here, you'll give us a bad name. And please don't think there are any easy pickings here. If you thought that you're very much mistaken.'

Elsie got sulky again. 'I'm not going 'til I know when Ma's funeral is. I've got a right to be there. You can't stop me. I'm her daughter and Dad will want me there, I know he will.'

'And when we know we'll let you know.'

'What, haven't you organised it yet?'

'It might have escaped your notice, Elsie, but it's Christmas. The churches don't carry out funerals over Christmas. It'll be in the New Year.'

'So, how will you let me know?'

'Where's your flat?'

Elsie held her hand up to her face and inspected her fingernails. 'It's not exactly a flat.'

Tommy frowned at her and then it dawned on him. 'You're living in a brothel, aren't you? Don't tell me, it's that one down Buck's Row, isn't it?'

Elsie turned a flirtatious look on him. 'Ooh, our Tommy. Know it well do you? I'd be keeping my eye on him if I were you, Pearl. There's no saying what he's getting up to.'

Tommy stood and got hold of her arm, and Carrie couldn't help noticing, none too gently. 'I know what they say about it and none of it's good. If you're living there with that kiddie then I pity you and her, more her, poor little mite. I'll ask you again, is she on her own there?'

'Not exactly on her own.'

'So you've left her with the other tarts, probably in your room by herself. So really, she is on her own isn't she because your so-called friends are all probably flat on their backs.'

'A girls got to earn somehow.' She glanced at Carrie. 'We haven't all got men to pay for everything.'

Tommy pushed her towards the door and into the hall. 'We'll let you know when Mum's funeral is taking place, and now we know how low you've sunk we'll get a message to you.'

'You should come yourself, Tommy. They'd all love you there.' Tommy opened the door and pushed her out into the snow. 'Yeah, that's right,' she sneered at him, 'push me out. Me and my little'un have got nothing, and here you are in all your finery. You and that sister of mine have certainly come up in the world. Well, you mark my words, Tommy Dobbs, it won't last, it can't last, 'cause there's some who think she doesn't deserve what she's got. There's some who think it's time she shared it out a bit and do what's fair.'

'And who might that be?'

She tapped the side of her nose, giggling, then sauntered unsteadily down Nightingale Lane as she slipped on the snow, turned slushy by the horses that had gone by that afternoon, and frozen solid, her unsteadiness not just because of the iciness underfoot. Tommy was sure the whiskey they'd given her hadn't been her first drink that evening and was certain it wouldn't be her last.

He went into the sitting room and warmed his hands by the fire, the presence of their visitor weighing heavily on the three of them. He shivered and rubbed the top of his arms to warm them, shaken by the change in his older sister.

'That was awful,' said Pearl. 'I don't ever remember her being like that.'

Carrie stared into the flames. 'She wasn't, was she Tommy?' She glanced at her brother who said nothing. 'She was always the one with airs and graces. Why she had them I never knew. As a family we were as poor as church mice, I reckon the mice had more to eat than we did, and we had nothing to spare. I always got the impression Elsie thought she was a cut above us somehow. She has sunk about as low

as she can get.' She looked at her friend and sighed. 'You're right, Pearl, it was awful. I'm heartbroken. She's my sister and I hardly recognise her as the girl I was brought up with.' She glanced at Tommy. 'Tommy? You're quiet.'

'Don't know what to say. She's changed so much. Her hair...it's like brass. She always had lovely blonde hair, and something's happened to her...to her...'

'Her body,' Carrie finished the sentence for him. 'Her body is ravaged, scrawny. Her skin looked as though it hadn't seen a flannel in weeks. I hope she hasn't caught anything. Them soldiers she's been going with could have brought anything back from France. I don't suppose they were playing tiddly-winks if they ever managed to get time off.'

'Do they get time off at the front?' asked Pearl in a quiet far away voice.

'I dunno,' said Carrie. 'Maybe we should ask the boys. I've tried not to ask them things because I haven't wanted to upset them. S'pose I could ask them.'

'We can't leave them like that,' said Tommy. 'We must do something. Dad would want us to do something for her, and Mum, wouldn't she?'

Carrie shrugged. 'Who knows. She never mentioned Elsie and Rose to me whenever I saw her. It's like they'd disappeared into thin air. Who knows what she wanted. Whatever it was she never told me, but that's not really a surprise. Mum never discussed anything that meant anything with me.'

'It doesn't matter does it? We can't leave them like that, especially little Rose. Only the good Lord knows what's happening to that child. She could be witnessing all sorts.'

Pearl shrugged then looked at her husband with admiration. 'But, Tommy, you've already said tonight that if someone doesn't want to do something they can't be forced. It didn't look to me like Elsie was complaining about her life. If anything she seems to enjoy it, unless she's a good actress.'

'I don't care,' said Tommy. 'She's made her choice or maybe she didn't have one. I don't think we should be judging her for what she does. Len West is a complete and utter bastard, and why the hell Mum and Dad agreed for her to marry him is beyond me, but there it is, they are married and there's nothing can be done about it now.' He sat opposite Carrie and leaned towards her. 'You do agree with me, don't you, that we must do something?'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, of course I do, but she'll bring trouble to our door. I just want you to realise what it might mean, what it will mean. She's been with Len West too long not to have learnt some of his

ways. He sees everyone as a mark and she's probably been taught to think the same thing. She's our sister, Tommy, and we need to help her and Rose, but it's not going to be easy, especially if Len West is still on the scene.'

'It didn't sound as though he was,' said Pearl. 'If she's living at the brothel in Buck's Row there's no way he can be living there, surely?'

'He won't be living there unless he's using it as a business address, and I'm using the words loosely,' said Tommy, 'but whether he is or not you can bet your bottom dollar Elsie's not the only one he's got in his grip. There'll be others. There's bound to be others. It's one of the ways he makes his money, pimping out women for his own gain.'

'So what will we do?' asked Pearl, reaching for Tommy's hand. The thought of him going into the world of brothels, pimps and madams frightened her. 'I don't like the sound of it.'

He squeezed her hand to reassure her. 'Carrie and me will go, won't we, sis?'

Carrie's mouth was a grim straight line but she nodded, then rubbed Pearl's arm to reassure her. 'Yeah, we'll go, and soon. If I'm honest I'm worried sick about little Rose. I can't imagine the life she's leading. No child should be living in a brothel and I can hardly believe one of our own would allow it to happen.'

A heavy silence descended on them and suddenly the excitement of Christmas together seemed a million miles away.

'Merry Christmas?' said Carrie as she attempted a small smile.

Tommy sighed. 'Let's hope so.'



Chapter 60



‘WILL WE GO IN THE DAYTIME,’ Carrie asked Tommy, the next morning. ‘The thing is tomorrow is Christmas Eve.’

‘Does it make a difference?’

Carrie pulled a face. ‘I don’t know.’

Tommy closed his eyes and shook his head. ‘No, I don’t know either. Some of me mates went to the Buck’s Row brothel. They wanted me to go too but I was too scared.’

Carrie took a long swig of her tea. ‘Thank God for that.’

‘Anyway, I don’t think it will make a difference to that little girl, will it? She’s stuck in that place whether she likes it or not.’ He tutted and banged his hand on the kitchen table which made Carrie and Ida jump. ‘I know she’s my sister but I could bloody well...’ he gave a deep sigh. ‘You know what I mean.’

Carrie nodded. ‘Yeah, yeah I do. I know what you mean. The fact that she’s family makes it harder in a way. I’m as mad as hell at her but she’s my sister and I’m worried for her. Anything could happen to her.’

‘My mum was a prostitute.’

Carrie stared at Ida, her mouth dropped open, then at Tommy in disbelief, then at Ida again. ‘Ida?’

Ida looked up from the breakfast trays she was preparing for the soldiers and nodded. ‘Yes, yes she was. From when she was a young girl to the day she was killed. Murdered...by the one they called Jack the Ripper. That’s what they said, anyway. Or it might have been one of the two men what she was seeing. She was forty-seven when he took her life, leaving me and my sister to fend for ourselves until an aunt took us in. Well, she said she was our aunt but then we didn’t know any other and there was no one around who cared whether she was or whether she wasn’t. She weren’t much different mind. Always had different men in her rooms. We weren’t allowed to say nothing unless they spoke to us first, and then we had to do a little curtsy and call them uncle. Uncle, indeed. They weren’t no uncle, that I do know.’

‘Oh, Ida, I didn’t know.’

Ida smiled to herself. ‘Well why would you, ducky. It’s not the sort of thing you tell people is it? And she came to a sticky end so I s’pose I put it to the back of my mind. I don’t really remember her to be honest, just a faint memory, not even a photo. Shame really.’ She pulled a chair away from the table and sat down heavily, her thoughts far away. ‘Women don’t have it easy. They never have y’know. If I was younger and more agile I’d be one them suffragettes,’ she glanced at Carrie, ‘like your friend, Dorothy. And I understand why they do what they do because no one will listen to them unless they stir up the water. They probably don’t want to do it, deep down, but they know they’ve got to because nothing will change unless they change it.’

She rose from the table and straightened her apron, ready to start work again.

‘But it don’t matter what they do or how they change things, there’ll always be prostitutes. They serve a purpose and if a woman needs to make a few bob to feed her kiddies there’ll always be a punter ready to part with his change. Those girls don’t make it easy on themselves I grant you, like your Elsie. She comes across as being hard-faced and up for anything, but y’know I don’t think she’s really like that. You remember her different, don’t you?’ Carrie and Tommy both nodded. ‘So p’raps you should think about her the way you remember and not how she is now. She married that rat, Len West, and all he could think of her was that she was sitting on a goldmine, and he was going to make sure she used it, and it’s likely she had no choice in the matter. Don’t be too hard on her.’

Carrie and Tommy looked at each other, then both went over to Ida and put their arms around her.

‘You know we love you, don’t you?’ said Carrie. ‘You’re a wonderful person, Ida. Whatever your mum did or didn’t do she brought you into the world and you’re the best person I know, so she did something right.’

Ida went bright red and got flustered. ‘Oh, don’t be daft,’ she said, but she smiled broadly ‘I...I love you too, you know that. My life here is more than I could ever have wished for and I’ll always be grateful. I could have ended up like your Elsie, but I had a skill. I can cook. We all need to have something we can do. Women especially. Don’t forget that. You tell your Eliza, Tommy, to learn to do something. I’ll teach her to cook, how’s that.’

Tommy gave her a squeeze. ‘I’ll keep you to it.’



CARRIE WATCHED THE snow from the open front door as she stood waiting for Tommy. It gave Nightingale Lane the look of a Christmas card, clean, bright, and sparkling with glitter and she couldn't help her spirits rising even though the task in front of her and Tommy was one of the most challenging she had ever undertaken.

Her presents for John were packed and ready, hidden in an armoire in her bedroom. She had enjoyed every moment of wrapping them, wondering what Christmas morning would bring as he tore off the paper and string to see what Father Christmas had brought him. She had felt an excitement that she hadn't felt before, and realised that her happiness came from her son and if no other person came along to share their life with them she would be satisfied with the one they had together.

Ida had advised her that the best time to visit the brothel would be early evening.

'The girls will be getting ready for their visitors,' she said. 'If you go early they'll be asleep. They don't keep the same hours as you or I. If their Madam and the maid have got anything about them they won't answer the door until then.' Carrie had shaken her head in astonishment at Ida's vast knowledge of so many things and realised they had a real diamond in their midst. She had accepted Ida almost as a mother figure, her rotund comfortability and kindly nature making Carrie feel a security and cherishing she had lacked from Florrie. She had grown to love the generous woman, like a daughter loves a warm and caring mother.

'You're ready then,' said Tommy as he shut the door to his and Pearl's room and shrugged on his overcoat. He held up a pair of knitted gloves and a tasselled scarf. 'Pearl hasn't wasted her time while she's been resting,' he said, comically rolling his eyes. 'I'm not allowed to go out onto the ice-bound snowdrifts of London without my scarf and gloves.'

Carrie giggled. 'Stop complaining. You've got someone to care about you, haven't you?'

'Yeah, I s'pose so,' he said as he wound the too long scarf around his neck. 'That quiet, caring, reasonable wife of mine's got a bossy streak in her.'

'She's going to need it for when Eliza starts to grow up. I hear it gets worse before it gets better. You'll have two women to please not just the one.'

'Great.'

They left the house and stepped out onto the snow-covered street. Carrie clutched Tommy's arm, tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow, relishing the warmth against her leather-gloved hand. It

seemed suffocatingly dark, as though a black velvet cloak had been laid over the houses, even with the sharp white of snow. As they got closer to the end of Nightingale Lane the appearance of the snow changed to slush mixed with detritus from muddy boots and horse excrement, turning it a filthy brown.

'I'm scared, Tommy,' she said. Her breath made a cloud of vapour as they walked at a good pace, the iciness leaving a sharpness against her lips and the back of her throat. 'Everywhere seems different in daylight. I think if we could have gone to Buck's Row this morning I would have felt more confident, but when the night draws in everything seems more frightening. I don't like the shadows.'

Tommy chuckled. 'You were always scared of the dark.'

She raised her head and looked at him. 'Was I?'

'Don't you remember?' She shook her head. 'Mum said you were being feeble and Dad said he didn't like the dark neither because I think he was trying to make you feel better, so she said you were both feeble.'

'Tut. I don't think Mum was scared of anything.'

'No, but there's nothing wrong with a bit of healthy fear.' He inhaled and shook his head. 'Feels strange that she's not at Hanbury Street anymore. I know it sounds bad but I thought Dad would go first, didn't you?'

She nodded. 'Yeah, I did, what with that cough an' all. He's had that cough for as long as I can remember. Maybe he's got used to it and it's just part of him now.'

They walked to the tram stop and took the tram to Whitechapel Road where they got off at the third stop.

'Should we go and see Dad?' asked Carrie. 'P'raps he needs to know what's going on. With Elsie I mean.'

'Afterwards. We want to talk to him anyway, don't we, so let's get this thing over and done with. You never know, we might have some good news for him.'

'Yeah.' She raised her eyebrows. 'Then again.'



BUCK'S ROW HAD BEEN touched with the same magic as the rest of London; thanks to the recent fall of snow the seedy street looked like any other, but both Carrie and Tommy knew this street had a reputation, not least because it was a street where the murder of a woman had taken place, one of the sites of the Whitechapel murders.

'It was a long time ago, Carrie,' said Tommy, trying to sound confident. 'And a way away from where the others were found.'

'I know, and I'm being silly but I just wish Elsie wasn't living here.'

And Rose. What is she thinking, Tommy, to bring little Rose to live in a place like this?’

‘Remember what Ida said, some women don’t get a choice. And maybe her being in a brothel is safer than doing what she does from her own front room. I reckon there’s loads of women in Whitechapel doing what they have to do to put bread on the table. We said we wouldn’t judge.’

‘I’m trying not to, really I am, but all she had to do was go back home when Len West made it known to her he wanted her to be a working girl and he would be her pimp. It’s all she had to do. Florrie would never have turned her away because she was one of her favourites. Elsie and Alfie, the apples of her eye. Me and you...not so much.’

He snorted. ‘Not at all. Come on. I asked Joshka where it was. It’s right opposite the school.’

‘He knew where it was?’ she cried.

‘Yeah, course he did. Why wouldn’t he. He’s a single bloke, earning his own money.’

She looked contrite. ‘Oh, right.’ Then she frowned. ‘Why did they put it opposite a school?’

He laughed again. ‘They probably didn’t give it a thought, just took the first house that came up for rent.’ He led her to the outside of a house, non-descript, the same as every other house in the street, its door painted an unattractive brown. ‘What were you expecting?’ Tommy whispered. ‘A sign saying, “Here is the brothel?”’ She batted his arm in jest and he knocked on the door. ‘Three knocks, then two,’ he said.

Carrie rolled her eyes. ‘Oh, blimey. A secret code for punters. Well, make sure you forget it after this, Tommy Dobbs.’

The door was opened by a young woman dressed in a black dress with her hair pulled severely off her face and swept into a bun at the back of her head. She wore spectacles that gave her an owl-like appearance, her nose sharp. Like a beak, thought Carrie.

‘Yes?’ she said. She had an East End accent but was doing her best to lace it with a high-society timbre.

‘We’ve come to see Elsie West,’ Tommy said. He drew up his chest and Carrie knew he was holding his breath. She found his hand and squeezed it.

The girl frowned, making her glasses slip down her beaky nose. She swiftly pushed them back up with a finger and pulled her hand down just as swiftly, but not before Carrie could see her nails were bitten down to the quick. ‘Who wants her?’

‘We’re family,’ said Carrie. ‘And it’s urgent.’

‘Wait here,’ she said, and slammed the door, which remained

closed until it was opened again by a sleepy Elsie dressed in a faded housecoat that gaped at the front which did not provide any modesty.

‘What the bloody ‘ell do you two want? What yer doing here? You’ll get me into trouble.’

‘We want you to come with us, Elsie,’ said Carrie before Tommy could say anything. ‘We want you to leave all this behind and stay with us at Nightingale Lane.’

Elsie frowned. ‘Why?’

Carrie bristled. ‘Why? Why d’you think? You’re living in a brothel with your child. That good enough an explanation for you?’ She felt Tommy grip her arm and she collected herself and slowed her breathing. ‘Pack your stuff, and Rose’s, if she’s got anything to pack. There’s a room waiting for you there.’

For a few moments nothing was said and all that could be heard was the snow hitting the pavement as it fell even heavier than it was before they left Nightingale Lane, soaking the top of Carrie’s hat, then Elsie started to laugh...and laugh and laugh. She could barely stand for laughing and she doubled up, holding her stomach as though she had a bellyache.

‘Oh,’ she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. ‘I’ve heard it all now. You want me to come and live in your posh house in Nightingale Lane? A whore, in Nightingale Lane. Don’t make me laugh? Oh, too late. You already did.’

‘It’s not posh, Elsie. It’s a convalescence home, like a hospital. It’s not posh I assure you. We live there, yes, but we work there too.’

Elsie wiped her nose on her sleeve. ‘And what will I do?’

‘We can find you a job. Everyone who lives there does work of some kind. There’s always plenty to do and it’s got to be better than what you’re doing now.’

Elsie sniffed and wiped her nose again, then shook her head. ‘This must be sending you half mad having to come here and offer me anything,’ she said to Carrie. ‘You and me...sisters, aren’t we, but never friends.’ Carrie swallowed but held Elsie’s gaze. ‘Just didn’t get along, and you know why as well as I do. I’m like me mother. Just like Florrie.’ She shifted her hip and leant on the other side of the doorframe. ‘It’ll never work. I wouldn’t do it to you, me in your house, trying to be something I’m not. And I wouldn’t do it to me either. I know you think I’m scum and lower than the low, but I’ve seen the high life, and when this war is over I’ll see it again. Len’s earning decent money from his side lines and I’m doing alright here. Why would I give that up?’

‘Because he’s turned you into a whore,’ said Tommy through gritted teeth. ‘That was never you, Elsie.’

‘How do you know what was me?’ she said, turning on him,

suddenly angry. 'You didn't know anything about me, Tommy Dobbs, and you didn't care neither. Or you, Carrie. You two, as thick as thieves, always whispering in corners and sharing things. Did you ever think to include me? Did you hell? I know you didn't want to be sent away, Carrie, but I reckon Florrie did you a favour. Look where you are now. Wouldn't have the big house and people working for you, would you, if you hadn't been sent away?'

Carrie didn't answer, but pulled Tommy's sleeve. 'Come on, Tommy. I can't be bothered to explain it all to her. We tried.'

'No, wait a minute.' He pulled his arm away. 'What about Rose? This isn't the right place for her, Elsie, surely you can see that.'

'Her place is with me.'

'But she's not just with you, is she? She's with all the other tarts and all those men who come and go, men you don't have a clue about. You don't know what they might do. It's not right, Elsie. Not for a little kiddie like that. Let me and Carrie look after her until things improve for you and Len.' Carrie kept silent. She knew he was cajoling Elsie, and she knew he could do it too. 'We can make sure she gets some schooling along with Carrie's lad and you can get on with whatever it is you do without having to worry about her. And I know you worry about her, 'cause you're her mum, aren't you? All mums worry about their kids.'

To her surprise Carrie saw Elsie's eyes fill with tears which she quickly brushed away looking embarrassed. 'Course I want better for her. Everyone wants better for their kids, but I'm doing my best, can't you see that?'

'Yes,' he said. 'We can see how much you love her, and you're doing your best for her. So, do the right thing and let her come to us, just for the time being. You can come and see her whenever you want to,' he glanced at Carrie, 'that's right isn't it, Carrie?' Carrie nodded. 'And you'll be free from the worry.'

'What about Len? What will I tell him?'

'Er, I dunno, make something up. Tell him someone tried to get into her room and it's not safe for her anymore. Say anything. He's her dad. He won't want anything to happen to her, will he.'

Elsie looked at them both, taking a deep breath, then disappeared from the hall, shutting the door against them.

'What do you think that means?' said Carrie. 'Has she dismissed us or what?'

Tommy shook his head. 'I dunno.' He blew out a breath. 'Christ, I'm exhausted...and bloody freezing.'

'You did alright though.' She smiled at him. 'You meant it didn't you, all that, that you said to her?'

'Yeah, I did. I just hope it got through to her.'

Moments later the door opened and Elsie appeared with a sleeping Rose in her arms.

'She's not eaten since this morning,' she said. 'I've been sleeping so I haven't had time to get something for her. She'll be starving when she wakes up.' She pushed the sleeping bundle into Tommy's arms and stepped back into the hall. 'I want her to know who her mum is. I want her to know that I did my best for her and that if things had been different we would have had a nice little cottage in the country with a pony for her to ride by now and everything else that's nice, and that one day that's what we'll have and as soon as I do I'll come and get her, d'you hear me?' Tommy nodded as tears ran unchecked down Carrie's cheeks as she watched her sister give away her only child. Ida was right. This was the Elsie she remembered, the one she knew, not the brash, brassy streetwalker she had become. 'Don't let her call anyone else Mum and Dad. Me and Len, we're her mum and dad and we always will be. This is just for a little while. I'll come and get her soon. Tell her I haven't dumped her, but I'm a working woman and just for now...' She took a breath as her eyes filled with tears and her voice wobbled with emotion. 'I will come and get her. I will. When I've got everything in place for her.'

'I know you will,' said Tommy quietly. He and Carrie stood on the front step, flakes of snow covering their heads as Elsie quietly shut the front door. They both looked into the child's face, flushed with warmth, speckles of snow landing on her eyelashes.

'Let's get off to Hanbury Street,' said Tommy. 'Dad might not have much to eat but at least it'll be warm. It's brass monkeys out here.'

They turned and went down Buck's Row the way they came, walking as fast as they could to get the little mite inside. The streets were deathly quiet with little evidence of the anticipated celebration only a day away.

'I think Whitechapel's forgotten it's Christmas,' said Carrie, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the front of her shawl. 'I don't remember it being so quiet.'

'Pubs aren't open yet, and even when they are they're not allowed to show any lights don't forget. You wait, in an hour there will be a never-ending stream of men going into the bars, and a bunch of girls waiting outside to make sure they get some of their money before they go in and pour the lot down their throats. I reckon Elsie's got the right idea. Street-walking's a mug's game.'

'I can't believe what we've just done. I can't believe she gave Rose up, just like that. It nearly broke my heart.'

'She knew, Carrie. Deep down. She knew it was the right thing. We don't know what kind of life they've led there, we can only guess, and I reckon we'd not be far off the mark. Whatever Elsie decides to do is

up to her, but it's no place for Rose and she knows it. That's why she gave her up to us, 'cause she knew we'd give her a decent home.'

'D'you think she'll ever come for her?'

'No. I don't.'



WHEN ARTHUR OPENED the door in Hanbury Street he looked pleased to see them, but surprised that Tommy had his arms full and what was in the bundle he was carrying.

'That can't be your little 'un, Tommy,' he said frowning.

'No, Dad, it's Rose, Elsie's girl.'

'Elsie?' he exclaimed, glancing past him and looking hopeful. 'Is she here too?'

'No, just us, Dad,' said Carrie. 'You got anything in your cupboards yet?'

'Oh, bloody 'ell, you checking up on me already? Give me a break, girl.'

'No, I'm not checking up on you, but when Rose wakes up she's going to need something to eat. She hasn't eaten since this morning apparently, that's if you can believe it, which I don't. More like yesterday I reckon.'

'Why?'

Carrie glanced at Tommy. 'It's a long story.'

'I got some food for me and Alfie. There's some new bread and a fresh block of cheese. I even got a couple of eggs and some butter, although I had to practically beg to get them, and there's spuds and a few knobbly carrots. And I got a beef bone from the butchers.'

'A beef bone, eh?' said Carrie, grinning. 'And what are you going to do with that?'

'I 'aven't got a clue, but Florrie used to get them.'

'I expect she made soup, Dad. How do you fancy some soup to go with your new bread?'

Arthur looked up at her and smiled and Carrie's heart nearly broke in two. 'Now, that would be lovely, duck.'

She settled Rose on the sofa, undoing the blanket that Elsie had wrapped around her body.

'Well she's clean enough. Look, her clothes are old, practically threadbare in places but they're clean. She kept her clean and tidy so that says something.'

'What does it say?' asked Arthur frowning. 'Have I missed something, 'cause I'm struggling to work out why she's with you.'

'She's coming to live with us, Dad,' said Tommy. 'We went to see Elsie and told her we thought it wasn't the right place for a child to be

raised.'

Arthur sat up, blinking. 'What, you went to that place, that brothel where she lives.'

Carrie came out of the scullery, a tea towel wrapped around her middle, a knife in one hand, a potato in the other. 'Did you know she lived there then, Dad?'

'Yeah, I knew. Your mother told me. She said some of the neighbours had been talking. Elsie had been seen going into the brothel in Buck's Row. No woman goes into a brothel unless she's got something to do with it, and our Elsie never could cook and as for being someone's maid, forget it. She was always a lazy sort, never helped around the house that's for sure, when she was here, not even when the baby came. Would rather lay on her back and earn her money that way than do anything worthwhile.'

'Did you not want to get Rose out of it? She was only a few streets away from you and me Ma.'

'I did, but your mother said we should leave well alone. I don't think she liked that Len, not after he diddled her out of...' Arthur went quiet and flushed a little. 'Well, you know. She said Elsie had made her choice and that she'd come home when things got too bad.'

By the time the soup was made and ready to be poured into bowls Alfie had come downstairs, enticed by the mouth-watering smell, and Rose had woken. She looked around her at the strange room, then at Arthur and Tommy and immediately burst into tears.

'Now, now, little one,' said Carrie softly. 'You're safe. I'm your Auntie Carrie. This is Uncle Tommy, and here...' she pointed at Arthur, 'this is Grandad.'

Rose stopped crying and stared at Arthur. 'Grandad?' she said in a soft little voice. 'My Grandad.'

'Yes, do you know him?'

'Ma telled me. Ma said Grandad would come for me one day. To look after me and buy me a dolly.' Carrie wiped the tears from her eyes and led Rose over to Arthur who promptly sat the little girl on his lap.

'Are you hungry, poppet?' he asked her. She nodded. 'Would you like some of Aunt Carrie's soup what she just made, and some nice bread to go with it?' She nodded again. Carrie took two bowls of steaming soup and placed them on the little table by Arthur's elbow, then a plate of bread, neatly cut into fingers.

'What about you, Tommy? Our Alfie's already digging into a bowlful in the scullery. Want some?'

'Daft question, Sis, it smells that good. Couldn't be better for a night like this.'

Carrie, Tommy, and Alfie sat close together on the sofa, their

elbows knocking into one another as they spooned soup into their mouths. Rose ate hungrily and Carrie watched the little girl benignly, her eyes going to Arthur as he encouraged Rose to finish her bowl.

‘You alright, Dad?’ Carrie asked him as he wiped his last piece of bread around his bowl to pick up the last remnants of soup.

‘Cor, that was blinding, our Carrie. Haven’t eaten like that for ages, well since...’ He looked down at his empty bowl and then stared into the fire. ‘I miss that woman. Can’t believe she’s gone. Just can’t believe it. It’s not right, y’know. It should have been me what went first. I’m older, I’ve had me problems over the years with my chest and everything. It should have been me what went.’

‘I’m not sure it works like that,’ said Carrie. ‘Mum was taken off by something we can’t see wasn’t she? Maybe she had a weakness, we don’t know, do we?’

Tommy stared hard at Carrie and she caught his stare. They’d come to Hanbury Street to talk to Arthur about moving into Nightingale Lane.

‘Have you thought anymore about coming to us, Dad?’

Arthur sighed. ‘Yeah, I’ve thought about it. The thing is if I give up this place someone else will move in and if I want to come back because I feel I’ve made a mistake, I won’t be able to, will I?’

Tommy put his spoon into his bowl and leaned forward, ready to take over the conversation. ‘You will if you don’t tell anyone. They don’t need to know you’ve moved out, you could be coming to us for a holiday, or to spend the Christmas at Nightingale Lane.’

‘Tommy’s right, Dad. Who needs to know? And you *could* come to us for Christmas, it’s a good idea, and it will give you a chance to see what we do there and how we live. If it suits you can stay. If it don’t, well, you can come back here, no harm done.’

Arthur looked from one to the other and took a deep breath. ‘I’ve got to admit I wasn’t looking forward to spending Christmas by meself, and I know Alfie wasn’t looking forward to it neither.’ He held Rose tighter to him, who had now stuck her thumb in her mouth and looked ready to go to sleep again. ‘And I’d get to know my grandkids, wouldn’t I? Little Rose here, and your John.’ He sighed again. ‘I said to Florrie we was missing out, but she said once people left home they didn’t need their parents fussing around ‘em all the while. I never agreed with that but you know how she was. It was her way or no way, not that I’m running her down. She was a good woman who meant well. She just got it wrong sometimes.’

‘So you’ll come to us then?’ said Carrie, smiling. ‘At least for a while until you know how you feel?’

Arthur nodded. ‘The only problem I’ve got is the rent on this place. Work’s been a bit short of late and the kitty’s a bit low on funds.

Could I...is it alright if I...?’

‘I’ll take care of it, Dad,’ said Tommy. ‘Put it out of your head. I’ll put down a month’s rent and then you can forget about it. That should give you long enough to decide what you want to do.’

‘You sure, son?’

Tommy smiled and glanced at Carrie who smiled back. ‘I’m sure, Dad.’



THEY GOT BACK TO NIGHTINGALE Lane in time for Carrie to put John to bed.

‘It went better than I thought,’ she said to Ida who was sitting in one chair with her feet up on another as she sipped a mug of tea.

‘Did it, ducky. In what way?’

‘Elsie saw sense about Rose. She’s in my sitting room with John and they’re getting on famously.’

Ida took her feet from the chair and rested her elbows on the table. ‘Dear God, that must have been hard for her, giving up her kiddie like that. Why do you think she did it?’

Carrie shrugged. ‘It’s not nice there, Ida. Elsie looked like she’d been pulled through a hedge backwards. Her hair was all over the place, scraped up around her head like it had been done at one time, but left to droop for days on end. Her dressing gown was all pulled this way and that. She didn’t even mind coming to the front door like it. That’s what I meant when I said I don’t remember her being like that. She was always careful with herself.’

‘She must have been upset though?’

Carrie sat at the table and poured more tea into Ida’s cup and one for herself. ‘It was horrible, Ida, really horrible. My heart went out to her. Could I give, John up? Never. I could never give him up so I know she’s made a sacrifice.’

‘Would she not come with you?’

Carrie shook her head. ‘No. We asked her, tried to persuade her but she wouldn’t. She’s still in thrall to that Len West, won’t do anything without his say so.’

Ida shook her head and looked sad. ‘He’s got her right where he wants her, hasn’t he? Earning money for him while he’s up to all sorts. I’d like to know what else he does.’

‘Whatever it is you can bet your bottom dollar it’s not legal.’



CARRIE TOOK JOHN AND Rose up to John’s bedroom and made up a

truckle bed for Rose. She put fresh linen sheets on the bed and an embroidered pillowcase, and laid a pretty eiderdown over the top. Rose watched her while she worked, not speaking, but taking everything in.

‘Is that Rose’s bed?’ she asked Carrie.

‘Yes, sweetheart,’ said Carrie. ‘Just for tonight. I expect you’d like your own room, wouldn’t you. Where did you sleep at the other house.’

‘With Ma in Ma’s bed.’

Carrie’s eyes widened. ‘With your Ma?’ Rose nodded, her thumb in her mouth. ‘All the time?’ Rose nodded again. ‘Oh.’ Carrie wanted to ask her, needed to ask her. ‘Did Daddy stay?’

Rose took her thumb out of her mouth. ‘Daddy?’

‘Yes, sweetheart. Your Daddy.’

Rose frowned. ‘Daddy not there.’

‘What, never?’ Rose frowned again as though searching for a memory, then shook her head. Carrie sat on the bed and pulled Rose next to her. I have to know, she thought. I must know if only for Rose’s sake. I need to know what she’s seen in her short life and if she remembers it. ‘And what about Ma’s friends. She had her friends visit her, didn’t she?’

‘Yes, Ma’s friends came. Uncle Reg and Uncle Lou and Uncle Bill and Uncle Frank.’

‘And did they stay?’ Rose nodded. ‘With Ma?’ She nodded again. ‘And you?’

‘When I woke up they gave me sweets.’

‘They didn’t hurt you, did they?’

‘Once when I was naughty and wouldn’t go to sleep. Uncle Lou smacked me and said I had to go to sleep, and fast.’ She shouted the last two words.

Carrie swallowed down her revulsion. ‘And what did Ma do?’

‘She said I should try to go to sleep, so I did.’

Carrie put her arms around her and hugged her close. ‘You know that will never happen here, Rose,’ she said. ‘We’ll look after you until Ma has somewhere nicer to live. Do you understand?’

‘Is Ma at home?’

‘She’s at the house in Buck’s Row. It’s not your home, sweetheart.’

‘With the other ladies? They’re Ma’s friend’s. They look after me sometimes. When they’re not working.’

‘Well, that’s nice, but it’s nearly Christmas Day and you and Grandad are going to be here.’

‘And Ma?’

‘I think Ma will be working, Rose.’

Tears ran silently down Rose’s cheeks as Carrie helped her undress.

She pulled one of John's nightshirts over her head and helped her into bed.

'I want my Ma,' Rose whispered. 'When will Ma come?'

'Maybe soon,' said Carrie. 'Hopefully soon.'



'I'M NOT SURE, TOMMY. We thought we were doing the right thing, but now I'm not sure. She's missing Elsie and it's breaking my heart.' Tommy and Carrie were sitting with Pearl in the sitting room while Carrie told them of her misgivings.

'She was bound to miss her,' said Tommy, 'but you can't think that living there is better for Rose than living here. You can't think that.'

'But she wants her Ma. She obviously loves her.'

'She loves her because she's known no different. What did she say about Len?'

Carrie shook her head. 'Don't think she even knows who he is.'

Tommy rolled his eyes. 'There's a surprise. Bet he only goes there to pick up his money.'

'Do you think that brothel belongs to him?'

'I'd put money on it.'

'So he's earning off all those girls.' Tommy nodded and Pearl shook her head in disgust.

'He sounds like a right charmer.'

'Charmer isn't the word I'd use. He's no good, never has been. So what did Rose tell you? Did you ask her about the house?'

'She sleeps with Elsie, in her bed.'

Pearl gasped. 'Not when she's got men there? Please say she's not there when Elsie's working.'

Carrie's mouth formed a straight line. 'She knows Uncle Frank and Uncle Bill and Uncle Lou who smacked her for not going to sleep at the right time.'

'And Elsie allowed that?'

'Sounds like it.'

Tommy stared at Carrie. 'And you think we've done the wrong thing. Well, we haven't. We've done the right thing. I know it's painful for Rose, and no doubt for Elsie too, because she's a little girl who wants to be with her Ma, but she's only three years old. All she's known is strange men sleeping with her Ma. How can that be right? No, Carrie, we did right. We can help Rose when she's missing Elsie, give her the care she's been missing. Love her and hug her and keep her safe. She'll get fed regular, and she'll have John as her playmate, and Eliza too when she comes home, and not a bunch of tarts who earn their living on their backs. She's not going back and that's an end

to it.'



Chapter 61



ELSIE SHUT THE FRONT door then stood with her back against it, her eyes closed, and thought about what it meant to her to have Rose away from her. She liked this time of the day. It was quiet, the other girls would be in their own rooms getting ready for the night's business, and it meant she could be herself in her own space and not what she had to pretend to be when the punters turned up.

'Who was that?' Elsie opened her eyes at the sound of the voice she had come to hate. Mrs Stroud, the madam Len had hired to keep the girls in order and make sure he got all the money that was due to him. Elsie had offered to do the job herself, as his wife she felt it should have been her role, but Len had had other ideas.

'Why would I want you to do that?' he'd said. 'You're one of the best girls I've got. They all ask for you, prepared to pay a premium for your services. Don't make no sense, Elsie.'

'But I'm your wife,' she'd pleaded with him. 'You can't be happy with other men using me for you know what when I could be part of the business. I could look after the girls, take on some good ones. Please Len, let me do it. Don't take on anyone else.'

He'd grabbed her arm and pushed his fingers into what little flesh covered her bones, making her cry out in pain. 'When I want your opinion I'll ask for it. And while we're on the subject this business ain't nothing to do with you. You're a tart, like the others, and don't you forget it.' He'd let her arm go and she'd rubbed it trying to rub away the hurt, tears coursing down her cheeks. 'When you're older. When you've lost your looks and the punters don't fancy you anymore you can do it, but not until I say. Alright?'

'Alright', she'd said in a small voice. She knew to cross Len wasn't a good idea. He didn't mind handing one out to her when he wanted. She'd had the bruises and the broken bones to prove it.

'None of your business,' she said to Mrs Stroud. 'Personal.'

Mrs Stroud crossed her arms over her ample bust and raised her eyebrows, chuckling. 'Oh, personal is it. We don't do personal here. When we have visitors they pay. Understand?'

Elsie went up to her and stood close to the woman, reeling at the alcohol on her breath. 'I think you're forgetting who I am.'

'I know who you are,' Mrs Stroud answered her. 'You're a tart like the others. Just because you're married to the owner of the brothel makes no never mind to me. He's told me not to make allowances for you, so you need to get your arse up them stairs and get ready for your regulars. You look a proper mess and we don't want them changing their minds, do we?'

'I shouldn't think they could care less. It's not my face or my clothes they're lookin' at.'

Mrs Stroud's face hardened. 'Just get up them stairs, girl.'



IN HER ROOM, ELSIE sat at her dresser and covered her face with her hands. She knew what she'd sunk to but couldn't remember how she'd got there. She pulled her hands away from her face and frowned into her mirror. She'd had such high hopes when she'd been chosen by Len West. She knew he had a reputation but it made him more attractive because she knew he was popular with other women and it seemed he'd chosen her. Florrie had been pleased too and that had made her happy. She'd loved her mum and wanted to please her, but when Len had taken over the brothel on Buck's Row, not for a moment had Elsie thought she would be working there.

Len had managed to fleece Florrie out of the money Arnold Bateman had given her so he could pay the first few months' rent on the house in Buck's Row, telling Florrie she would get earnings from it. Elsie wished she hadn't told him about Carrie going to India and the fact that Arnold had given Florrie a not insubstantial amount of money for Carrie's services because immediately he had gone to see Florrie and put a business proposition to her which Florrie had jumped at. Elsie hadn't liked it, but Florrie had practically thrown the money at him which had surprised Elsie. She had never imagined her mother would have been happy to finance a brothel.

'I didn't tell her what it was, did I, you silly cow,' he'd said to Elsie when she'd questioned him about Elsie's involvement. 'Like I'd tell her it was for rent on a brothel. Why would I tell her something like that when she might have gone to the authorities and got me right in it.'

'What *did* you say?' she'd asked him.

'That it was going to be a home for fallen women,' he'd thrown his head back and laughed, 'which in a way it is. Clever of me to come up with that I reckon, 'cause it's what I'm going to tell everyone. When I told her I'd got a contract from the government the silly old bat believed me.'

‘Don’t call her that, Len. She’s still my Ma.’

‘Yeah, well she’s as daft as you. Anyway, she’s helped me out. We’re family now, aren’t we, and families help each other and she’ll get something out of it.’

‘Like what?’

‘When it starts earning she’ll get an income.’

‘And when will that be?’

He’d pushed his face into hers. ‘When you get on your back and when I say,’ he’d growled.

Elsie glanced towards the double bed where she and Rose slept, the dent where the little girl’s warm body had rested still visible in the mattress. She swallowed hard trying to stop tears from threatening to ruin her make up, not that she thought anyone would notice. Rose had been her reason for carrying on, the love of her life. She was such a sweet little thing, never questioning Elsie about her “friends” who seemed to visit so often and changed with increasing regularity now that soldiers were coming home on leave. She felt incredibly alone and she suddenly knew how much more Rose had meant to her, not just her little girl, the child she loved with all her heart, but in a way her protector, because while Rose was there she wasn’t on her own and she could face anything that came her way.

Len never bothered about the child, had even questioned that Rose was his, and it was then that Elsie knew Len wasn’t hers and never had been. He had used her. Why he had married her she didn’t know; she knew he’d slept with some of the other girls because they had apologised for it and she had shrugged her shoulders and said it wasn’t their fault. Len wasn’t someone you refused anything and she was more than aware the girls wouldn’t have been able to refuse him.

A knock came on her bedroom door and she got up and answered it.

‘Elsie?’ It was Marcie who had the room next door. ‘Have I heard right? Rose isn’t here anymore.’

Elsie shook her head. ‘I had to let her go, Marcie.’

‘But why, she was alright wasn’t she?’

‘Was she? Would you want a kid of yours watching what you do?’

‘But I thought you always made sure she was asleep.’

Elsie shook her head and turned away. ‘How was I meant to make sure of that. You and the other girls helped me so much, Marcie, and I really appreciated it but I had to decide and I only had a few minutes to make the decision. They were waiting at the front door and old Stroud was circling. I knew she’d have something to say about having people here even if I didn’t invite them. Rose has gone to live with my sister in Nightingale Lane.’

‘Not the one who married that soldier, her with the boy.’

‘Yeah, that’s the one.’

‘I didn’t think you and her got on.’

‘We don’t.’

‘So why...’

‘Because she can do for Rose what I can’t. I didn’t want to let her go but I had to, Marcie, you can see that. What choice did I have? Len had started saying Rose wasn’t his and that it was time I got rid of her.’

‘She is his though, right?’

‘Yeah, course she is.’ She looked embarrassed. ‘Len was my first.’

Marcie looked surprised. ‘Jesus. You poor cow.’

‘Anyway, it’s done now. When things get better I’ll go and get her. She’ll be alright. I don’t like my sister but that’s not her fault. My brother’s not too bad. He married Pearl Wilson and she’s a good ‘un. They’ll take care of Rose until I’m ready to take her somewhere better than this.’

Marcie looked sceptical. ‘And when will that be?’

‘Soon,’ Elsie said, confidently. ‘Very soon.’



Chapter 62



CARRIE LOOKED OUT OF her bedroom window and smiled. Christmas Eve had dawned and it was still dark outside. A thrill went through her. She liked the dark mornings, could sense some security in them because she was at home with the people she loved, doing the work she loved, and with Christmas on the horizon the day promised to be glorious with anticipation. She washed with her favourite lavender soap and dressed quickly then ran down the stairs, as excited as she knew John would be when he woke. Ida was in the kitchen where she was to be found every morning, as efficient as a regularly wound clock. She made sure she was there before anyone else got up; it was her domain and she took it very seriously and would never have brooked anyone else doing the chores that were her daily staples, the things that kept her going for the family she loved. She would make sure there was enough fuel in the range to heat the hot water needed in such a large house, then begin to cook breakfast, the first task, a huge pot of porridge on the hob which everyone would be given to stave off the cold of the morning.

Later that day many of the soldiers would leave Nightingale Lane and go to their respective homes for Christmas. Some had already left, eager to get to their families for a Christmas break before being sent back to the front to continue fighting for their country. By Christmas Day there would be few left, and the family, along with the refugees, would be left in the house to enjoy the festivities together.

Ida had used her contacts at the market to ensure a good supply of food so that no one went without on Christmas Day, even making up little food hampers for the soldiers to take with them when they left which had been a wonderful surprise for all of them, for some a lifesaver for their families who had suffered greatly because of the food shortages and lack of work. Not everyone in the country had the same war, and Ida and Carrie had acknowledged the fact between them. What difficulties the war had brought some, others had sailed through, perhaps because it had brought out their most ingenious and practical side to ensure there was food on the table. Food, warmth and

safety had become the most important things in their lives, and where some floundered, others rose to the challenge.

Those who lived and worked at 99 Nightingale Lane had seen what war could do to the young men who had been sent to France to fight, the pain, the uncertainty, the mental anguish, the wondering if they would survive another stint in the trenches at the front. Ida, Carrie, Tommy and Pearl were aware of what a seemingly endless war had delivered on the soldiers, so they never felt bad about being in a position to supply those young men with decent food. Ida never felt guilty about it. She had worked with market traders all her life, her husband had been a market trader until he'd died of the consumption due to being out in every kind of weather and she knew how it all worked, the greasing of palms when food became available, the scratching of one another's backs to keep the relationships going that could be useful to them, which had stood her in good stead when she'd begun her role as cook at number ninety-nine.

'Morning, Ida. Happy Christmas Eve.'

'Morning, ducky. You look happy.'

'I'm looking forward to seeing how John is today. Christmas Eve is such a special time and it's the first time he'll have some idea of what's going on.'

'And what about little Rose?'

'Yeah, I s'pose it won't be the easiest day for her, but I'm hoping she'll be swept along by some of John's excitement.'

'I was wondering,' Ida said, though she was really wondering if she should say what was on her mind, 'should we not try and convince Elsie to come here tomorrow. Our celebrations will begin in the early morning, so I've been thinking, I can't see why she wouldn't come. What's to stop her?'

Carrie nodded. 'You might be right, Ida, but how are we going to get to her. She said we weren't welcome at the house last time so I don't know how she's going to feel about us turning up twice. And there's only one thing to stop her, and that thing is Len West.'

'I could go, ducky. I wouldn't mind. And it would mean the little 'un will have a chance to spend Christmas Day with her Ma.'

'Oh, Ida.' Carrie put her arms around the big woman as best she could. 'Ida, I understand, I really do. You're thinking about your own Ma aren't you? I'm so sorry, Ida, really I am.' She held the woman at arm's length and looking into her eyes. 'Are you sure, really sure you want to go there.'

Ida nodded. 'Do you think I don't know people from Buck's Row? 'Course I do. These were the people I knew, Carrie, that my mum knew. All of us from Whitechapel, it was a real community where we all knew each other. And y'know, many of the women knew what my

ma was up to but they didn't judge her for it. She had no husband, no man in tow and she had to put food on the table somehow.' Ida sorrowfully shook her head. 'If only...if only she'd been more careful. Too trusting, see, trusted everyone because she thought she could. They all trusted one another and then this stranger turns up and...it's all over.'

'Was it him? Y'know who I mean.'

'That's what they said. But then they said it could have been someone else, a couple of men she'd been seeing, so we never got to the bottom of it.'

'When will you go?'

'Not 'til later. I want to get things ready for tomorrow. Hannah and Alitza have offered to do some preparation so that we're not in the kitchen for hours. If we do it properly we can all be together for Christmas Day. Is that alright, Carrie? I'd like to be with you, Tommy and Pearl.'

Carrie smiled affectionately. 'Ida, it's all I want, for us to be together. It's been quite a year and we need a day off where we can be us as a family and not just people who work together.'

'And it will be the last time our Belgian friends will celebrate anything with us. They'll be leaving soon, won't they.' She tutted and looked around. 'We won't know it here will we?'

'No, not until the next lot of soldiers turns up. I think we should make the most of the quiet time while we can. We don't know how long all of this is going to go on for.'

'And then what? What will you do, Carrie, after the war, with number ninety-nine I mean?'

Carrie tipped her head to one side and smiled again. 'I have thought about it. I won't say anymore just now because I don't want to tempt fate, but I've got an idea that I reckon you'll love.' Her face suddenly dropped. 'That's if I can keep Arnold Bateman's sticky mitts off.'

'You haven't heard from him since Johan Stern was here have you?'

'No. I've been wondering about that an' all.'

'D'you think it scared him off?'

'I hope so, Ida. I really hope so.'



IDA LEFT THE HOUSE at four o'clock in the afternoon as the light began to fade. The dark didn't scare Ida. She'd been raised in a house that used only candles for light when the nights drew in, and sometimes for warmth if there hadn't been anything to put on the fire.

Coal was an expensive luxury that most could ill afford and often a chair or stool, or even a table would disappear from a room and the fire would suddenly be burning brightly. Everyone did it. If you needed warmth you would burn anything.

Ida had worn her best hat to give her confidence. There was nothing like a decent hat to make her feel good and her peacock blue one usually got lots of compliments, so it was the one she'd chosen for her task. She knew it wasn't going to be easy. Prying a working girl away from her pimp was one thing, even if it was just for one day, but when that girl was married to him, well that was a different matter altogether.

She hurried down Nightingale Lane as fast as she could. She wasn't as agile on her feet as she used to be and a fall could finish her off so she took the pavements carefully, watching her step as she dodged the icy patches and snow drifting up the curbs as she made for the tram stop. When she got on the tram there was a well-dressed couple in front of her. When she asked the tram conductor for a ticket to the Buck's Row stop of Whitechapel Road they glanced at her through narrowed eyes, looking down their noses as though she was an oddity. Ida returned their stares then turned to look out of the window, her own nose stuck in the air. She got off the tram in Whitechapel Road, crossing it at the corner of Brady Street, then walked the length of Brady Street until she got to Buck's Row.

'I remember this,' she said under her breath. 'The school, and there were people here mum knew.'

She stood on the corner of Brady Street and Buck's Row and drew in an icy breath. The temperature had dropped even lower and her heavy coat and woollen muffler couldn't keep the cold from her bones.

'I'm too old for this,' she murmured to herself through her muffler. For a brief moment her confidence deserted her, but then she thought of the expectant face of the little girl back at Nightingale Lane and knew she must continue. She pulled her muffler tighter over the lower half of her face and bent into the snow, her feet slipping on the ice forming in the slush underfoot.

When she got to the house she knew was her destination she lifted her gloved hand and knocked on the door. Tommy had given her the code, three knocks followed by two more. The door was opened immediately by the maid, who when she saw Ida and not a customer standing on the doorstep, nervously pushed her glasses back up her nose even though it wasn't required.

'Yes?'

'I've come to see Elsie West.'

'And who might you be?'

'I'm a friend...of her family.'

'She's not allowed personal visitors.'

'I understand, but I wouldn't come here if it wasn't necessary. I won't take up much of her time.'

The girl looked her up and down then stepped back. 'Wait here,' she said, and closed the door.

Ida heard footfall on wooden steps, the drone of a conversation not close enough to hear, then the sound of footsteps running down the stairs. The door was quickly flung open and in the opening stood Elsie. She was dressed in pink satin, the tightly corseted dress cut low at the front, her décolletage blushed with rouge, her make up intact, and her hair coiffed into plaits wound around her head. She frowned when she saw Ida.

'It's Ida Coyle isn't it? What are you doing here?'

'I'm sorry to bother you, Elsie. I'm the cook at Nightingale Lane. Your little girl came to stay last night.'

Elsie sprang forward and grabbed Ida's arm. 'What's happened? Is she alright? Oh, God, I knew I'd done the wrong thing letting her go.'

'No,' Ida said, grabbing Elsie's hand. 'No, she's perfectly well. But...well, it's Christmas Day tomorrow. I know Carrie and Tommy wanted you to leave here and come to Nightingale Lane.' Elsie put her finger to her lips. 'Not so loud. If they thought I was escaping they'd lock me in my room.' Ida looked astonished. 'I'm not joking,' said Elsie. 'If Rose is well why are you here?'

'Because my mum was a working girl. I remember her going out at night and not coming back for hours. It scared me and my sister to be left like that, and I'd stay awake all night waiting for her to come home because I thought she'd left for good...and one day she did. I've missed her from that day to this. All I'm saying is, if you can come with me now, you can stay with Rose tonight, Christmas Eve, the most special time of all for a little girl, then be with her tomorrow. You don't have to stay forever. It's all been explained to her that you're working and that when things get better you'll come and get her.'

'She knows?'

Ida nodded. 'She knows.'

'And she took it alright?'

'I'm not going to lie to you, Elsie. There were a few tears but this mornin' she was up with our John, eating porridge and telling him about Jesus and the stable.'

Elsie couldn't help but smile. 'Well, she would. She's clever like that...and kind too.'

'You've done very well with her.'

Elsie stared at Ida. 'Do you want to come in for a minute? Old Stroud's gone to her sister's in Bethnal Green for Christmas so things

are a bit easier here at present. You look frozen to the bone, Missus.'

'Yes, it's enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. I'm chilled right through.'

Elsie held the door open wider. 'Come in, Mrs. Coyle. I'll make you a hot toddy. I've got a little burner in my room. We're making spicy wine for the customers, an extra little treat to warm 'em up and part them from their money.' She laughed to herself. 'Got to get it out of 'em somehow.'

Ida stamped her feet on the step to get rid of the slush clinging to her boots and went into the hall which was surprisingly warm.

'Nice and toasty in here,' she said, unwinding her muffler from around her neck.

'Yeah, and thank God for that. There's no fun in getting undressed in the cold,' said Elsie. 'Goosebumps don't look nice. The punters don't like it.'

'No, I don't s'pose they do, ducky,' said Ida, her eyebrows raised.

As they got to the foot of the stairs the maid came out of a side room that looked a bit like an office and stood in front of Elsie.

'Where d'yer think you're going?' she asked her, her arms folded across her chest.

Elsie leant against the wall and folded her arms too. 'Where the bloody hell d'yer think I'm going? Where do I ever go? To my room, four eyes.'

'Mrs Stroud don't like...'

Elsie pushed herself away from the wall and stood so close to the maid their bodies were touching. The maid took a step back and Elsie's chin jutted forward. 'Mrs Stroud ain't here. And you're not going to tell her are you?'

'When she's not here I'm...'

'...Still the maid. My husband owns this gaffe, so don't come that up yourself stuff with me. It won't wash, not unless you want to find them glasses pushed down your throat. Don't think they'll do much good down there.' Ida watched silently as the maid turned and went back into the room from where she'd come, gently pushing the door shut. Elsie turned to Ida. 'That told her.' Ida nodded and followed Elsie up the stairs.

'Come in,' said Elsie, holding the door to her room wide so Ida could go in.

It wasn't a large room and had little furniture; a brass bed, a dresser with a mirror and stool, a washstand, and a low armchair. It was clean and tidy, the bed made and covered in an Oriental shawl with golden tassels. The chair was old and threadbare, but Elsie had hidden the worst areas with a huge cushion.

'It's not much,' she said, 'but it's mine. Sit down, Missus. Make

yourself comfortable.' Ida doubted it was possible to get comfortable in such a claustrophobic room, but she sat in the chair offered, unbuttoning her coat and boots.

'Now,' said Elsie. 'How about that toddy.'

'Not too much whiskey,' said Ida. 'I've got to walk home don't forget.'

'Oh, you'll be alright,' chuckled Elsie. She passed Ida a little glass decorated with gold leaf that sparkled in the candlelight. Ida sipped it carefully, feeling the hot liquid go down past her chest and into her stomach.

'That's not whiskey,' she said, holding the glass up to the candle.

'No, said Elsie grinning. 'It's a liqueur. One of my gentleman friends gave it to me. What d'you think.'

Ida licked her lips. 'Ooh, it's lovely that is. Very nice.'

'Now,' said Elsie, sitting on the stool in front of her dresser. 'You didn't come here for one of my toddies.'

'No,' Ida shook her head. 'I didn't, and this is none of my business, Elsie.'

'We can agree on that, it ain't.'

'No, but...well, I know it can't be easy for you.'

Elsie laughed. 'No one's ever said that to me before. I shouldn't think they could care less.'

'But you're wrong, y'know. They do care. Maybe you and Carrie haven't always seen eye to eye, and Tommy...'

'Thick as thieves, aren't they? I was always left out of their little secrets.'

'Well, that might have happened then, but you're not kids anymore. You've all got your own children and that changes things.'

Elsie shook her head. 'I can't just walk out of here. I've got commitments.'

'To Len West no doubt.'

'It's him I work for.'

'He's your husband. And Rose's father.'

'Not according to him, he isn't.'

Ida huffed. 'It makes no difference. You're her Ma. Put her first, just this once. Forget about Len West. I bet you don't even know where he is.' Elsie shrugged. 'There you are then. Get dressed, Elsie, not them things you wear for work but ordinary things if you possess any. Let Rose know you've got her best interests at heart and that you're missing her as much as she's missing you. You won't regret it, I can vouch for that.'

'I want to be with her, Mrs Coyle. She's all I've got now. Parting with her and handing her over to Carrie and Tommy was the hardest thing I've ever done, but they made me see it was all for her. She

didn't ask for this life.'

'None of us did, ducky. None of us did.'

Half an hour later Ida and Elsie walked side by side down Buck's Row, both wrapped up tightly against the cold, Ida's muffler against her face and Elsie in an old fitted coat and shawl she'd pulled from the back of her wardrobe. She also dug out a bright red hat with a turned-up brim, tall feathers in the crown that swayed with every step.

'They were mine back in the day,' she explained to Ida. 'Before I came to live here.'

'You kept them,' Ida replied. 'I'm surprised. I thought he would have bought you new ones with all the money he's earning.'

'Don't you mean what I'm earning for him. He don't do anything apart from go round his various houses picking up the purses.'

'So he's got others then?' Ida said, already out of breath as she got to the end of the street, her cheeks wobbling with the effort it took just to put one foot in front of the other.

'Oh, he's got others alright. They're not all in Whitechapel. He's got some where you'd least expect it, even one around the corner from Nightingale Lane.'

Ida gasped, the shock contorting her expression. 'No! Oh Lord, I bet the neighbours don't know.'

Elsie chuckled. 'I bet the men do.'

They carried on walking in silence; Ida finding it difficult to walk and talk at the same time, until they got to the tram stop. There were a few others waiting which meant there was one due.

'I don't have any money, Mrs Coyle. I'm not allowed to have money in my room in case it gets nicked.'

'Don't you worry about that, ducky,' replied Ida. 'I've got enough here for the both of us. It won't take the tram long to get us to the corner of Nightingale Lane. Then you can go and see Rose. She'll be that surprised to see you.'

'She don't know I'm coming then?'

'I thought it best. I wasn't sure what you would decide. We didn't want her to get more upset, what with it being Christmas Day tomorrow.'

'So, Carrie knows you were coming to see me? And Tommy?'

'Yes, they know.'

Ida watched Elsie as she looked down at her feet and momentarily close her eyes.

'It'll be alright you know,' said Ida, her heart going out to the girl whose brashness she felt sure was just an act to protect herself.

'Ashamed of me aren't they? I know they are, well, who wouldn't be? Who'd want a prossie for a sister?'

'Who'd want a prostitute for a Ma?' replied Ida, and Elsie met her

eyes with her own. Ida grabbed both of Elsie's hands and held them tight. 'I loved my mum. I didn't care what she did, I loved her with all my heart and I still do. I'll never stop loving her because I know what she was doing was because she didn't have any choices. She didn't have a good man helping her to raise her children and put food on the table. She got no help from no one, see. Things went wrong for her, and when things go wrong you find out who your friends are.'

She released Elsie's hands as the tram pulled up, the sound of its bell muffled by the falling snow, its resonance eerie in the quiet street.

'Your Rose loves you, and so do your sister and brother. They want to help you, they've offered to help you, and they want to help Rose too. Don't throw it back in their faces, Elsie. That's my advice which you don't have to take, but if you decide not to accept their help do it with some grace. They're good people. It might not be the right time for you to leave Buck's Row, but if you ever want to, and I know because I know them like they're my own, they'll be the ones to help you do it.'



'YOU CAME,' CRIED CARRIE as they walked in the front door at Nightingale Lane. 'I wasn't sure...'

Elsie nodded, a small smile on her lips. Carrie caught Ida's eye and Ida gave an almost imperceptible nod. 'Rose is in the kitchen with John, Elsie. They're just having some warm milk before I put them to bed. She'll be so happy to see you. Do you want to...?' Elsie nodded again and followed Carrie silently into the kitchen. When Rose looked up and saw her she squealed, slid off her chair and ran to her mother, her long fair hair flying out behind her.

'Ma. Ma,' she cried, pushing her face into Elsie's hair, nearly knocking her off her haunches. 'Did Father Christmas bring you? Did you come on his sleigh?'

Elsie glanced up at Ida and grinned. 'In a way, Rose. One of his helpers came to see me and told me you would be here for Christmas Day, so here I am.'

'Are you going to stay? Will you stay here forever?'

'Not forever, sweetheart? Not yet? Ma's got some things to sort out first, but when she's done she'll come and get you, and we can go and live in a little cottage in a forest, just like we always said we would. Remember?'

'I remember,' Rose replied, her voice a whisper. 'But it's a secret, isn't it?'

'Yeah, it's our secret.'



‘WHO’S THAT LADY?’

John was in bed, securely swaddled under the covers after Carrie had read him and Rose a bedtime story about a little mouse who was hiding in a house and saw Father Christmas come down the chimney to leave presents under the tree for the children who lived there. Both the children had found it fascinating and Carrie had been delighted they had got so much pleasure from it.

‘She’s Auntie Elsie, John. She’s Rose’s Mama.’

‘Why does she have paint on her face? Is she a clown?’

Carrie glanced across at Elsie who was sitting beside Rose on the bed. Even though they had eaten supper, Elsie’s lips were stained bright red with lipstick. Her skin was pale, and floury with face powder, and Carrie noticed the makeup had congealed into pink clumps on her cheeks. Underneath was the swarthy skin ravaged by the effects of too much alcohol. ‘Auntie Elsie is an actress and actresses must wear makeup when they go on stage, like in the pretend plays you and Dotty and Seraphina do for us when you dress up with clothes from the dress-up box.’

‘But she’s a big girl,’ he whispered. ‘Big girls don’t do plays, and she smells funny, like when Uncle Tommy comes back from the pub.’

‘Yes, John, actresses act in plays. Anyway, it’s time for you to go to sleep. You don’t want to be awake when Father Christmas comes do you? He might forget to leave your presents.’ John shut his eyes quickly, his long dark eyelashes resting against his cheeks. Carrie waited, smiling, knowing what he would do next. After a few moments he opened his eyes again and Carrie tickled his tummy. ‘Caught you.’

‘You caught me, Mama,’ he squealed.

‘Yes, I did. Don’t let Father Christmas catch you.’ Carrie put a finger to her lips, and glancing at Elsie blew out the candle and left the room, followed by her sister who blew kisses to Rose until they shut the bedroom door.

They went into Carrie’s bedroom, then through into her sitting room where Elsie took a packet of cigarettes out of her pocket and lit one, drawing on it deeply. Carrie sat down, watching her, wishing she wouldn’t smoke near the bedrooms but was reluctant to say anything in case it antagonised her sister. She kept quiet.

‘Mrs Coyle’s a nice lady,’ Elsie said. ‘It was good of her to brave the cold and come over to Buck’s Row.’

‘It was her suggestion, Elsie. She wanted to tell you about her mother. Did you know she thinks she was murdered by the Ripper?’

Elsie looked around the room. 'Thanks.'

Carrie bit her lip. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you, I just meant that she loved her Ma and regretted not being able to know her better. It was taken away from her when her mother was killed. I didn't know her story until yesterday. I've known her all this time, and she never said a word about it.'

'Ashamed I expect.'

Carrie shook her head. 'No, I don't think so. When she was telling us about her she said what a good woman she was and that she was doing her best to take care of Ida and her sister.'

Elsie lifted her chin and Carrie realised it wasn't going to be easy to get through to her. What she was trying to achieve with Elsie she wasn't sure. That Ida had persuaded her to leave Buck's Row when she should have been working was a miracle in itself. Carrie was sure she would never have been able to persuade her sister to come to Nightingale Lane, let alone stay the night and spend Christmas Day with them.

'We're not children anymore, Elsie. Whatever you thought of Tommy and me when we were kids living with Florrie and Arthur at Hanbury Street can be forgotten, can't it? We were just kids who didn't know anything. Look what happened to me. I was too naïve for my own good.'

'Do you think *I'm* a good woman?' Carrie stared at her. 'You said Ida said her mother was a good woman trying to do the best for her kids. Do you think of me like that?'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, Elsie, I do.'

Elsie's eyes filled with tears. 'Why,' she said in a whisper. 'Why would you ever think of me like that when I'm married to someone like Len West and I do what I do?' She swallowed and took a deep pull on her cigarette, her hand shaking. 'Your sister is a tart, Carrie. I might be married to the bloke who owns everything and everyone, but he owns me too. I have to do what I'm told. I never planned for any of this.'

Carrie pulled her chair closer to Elsie's and put her arm around her. 'I know you didn't,' she said quietly. 'We all know you didn't.' Elsie sniffed and put her head in her hands. 'Can I tell you something?' asked Carrie. Elsie looked up and nodded. 'When we left Buck's Row yesterday we went to Hanbury Street to see Dad. When he saw Rose in Tommy's arms he thought you were with us. You should have seen the look of disappointment on his face when he realised you weren't there.'

Elsie stared at Carrie, her eyes red rimmed, her skin blotchy with crying. 'Honest?'

Carrie nodded. 'He wanted to see you and Rose so much, but

Florrie had told him to leave well alone.' Carrie shrugged. 'So he did.'

'I'm glad he did. Len would have made minced meat out of him.' She laughed through her tears. 'Can you imagine Arthur trying to fight back. 'Put your dukes up,' he'd have said, with his fists rolled up into tight little balls and Len would have swung one punch and floored him.' Carrie laughed with her. 'Poor old Dad. He's had a lot to put up with, not least me Ma.' Carrie pulled a face and shrugged again. 'It's alright, Carrie, I know what she was like. I'm more like her than I care to admit. You're more like me Dad. She led him a merry dance.'

'But he loved her, Elsie, more than we knew.'

'Did he?'

'He misses her so much. I saw Dad cry properly for the first time in my life. It's something I don't want to see again.'

'I'm surprised you haven't asked him to come and live here.'

'I have.'

'Blimey. Surely you don't want us all here. Not sure how that would work.'

'We'd make it work.'



LATER, WHEN SUPPER was over and preparations had been made for the next day, they all sat in the sitting room at the front of the house watching the snow through the window, Ida and Francis included, sipping sherry and warming themselves by a roaring fire.'

'I can't believe I'm going to have a proper Christmas Day with Rose,' said Elsie. 'It'll be the first. Last year we spent it in one of those caravan things, y'know, made of metal, and when it rains it sounds like an earthquake. Len's cousin lent it to us. God, it was bloody freezing, and we didn't have no presents or Christmas dinner.' Her face dropped. 'Oh, no, I haven't got anything for Rose.' She pressed her hand to her face pushing the blood out of her cheek. 'She won't have anything to open Christmas morning.'

'She will,' said Tommy. 'Me and Pearl got the kids something on the way back from the hospital. We went to see Eliza today, Pearl as well.'

Elsie smiled at them both. 'Thank you, thank you for thinking of her. It's more than her Ma did.'

'You didn't know you was going to be here,' said Ida. 'If you had you would have got her something, wouldn't you?'

Elsie nodded. 'Yes, yes I would have. My little girl. My little Rose.' She turned to them again. 'And how is she, your little Eliza? Who does she look like?' Carrie beamed. This...this is what she wanted, her family together, talking as friends. It must be the Christmas spirit, she

thought. It's got into all of us.

'She's grand,' said Tommy, 'isn't she Pearl?'

'She is,' answered Pearl, pushing her hand into Tommy's. 'She's done so well. A proper little fighter. It's what they said, isn't it, Tommy. That she's a little fighter.'

He nodded. 'And she's Pearl to a T, red hair and everything. Even a few freckles I noticed today. We can't wait for her to come home and be with her family.'

'I hope I get to see her,' said Elsie wistfully. 'I love babies.'

'Course you will,' said Pearl. 'We'll let you know when she's home and you can visit.'

'I'd like that. I'd really like that.'

A knock on the door made them jump.

'There you go,' said Tommy. 'Father Christmas is early tonight.'

'I'm hoping it's Dad,' said Carrie, getting up to answer the door. 'He had to work today and he said he wouldn't be here 'til after supper. What he means is, our supper, not his. I doubt he's eaten. Any stew left, Ida? He'll be wanting something to eat I expect. And for Alfie. He should be with him.'

'I'll go and get it, Carrie. They can have it in here with us, can't they, in front of the fire.' Ida got up and followed Carrie out, she going into the kitchen and Carrie humming a Christmas carol as she went to the door. She was looking forward to Arthur arriving. It meant her family would be together again, just as it should be.

As she got the door open someone barged against it with their elbow and pushed their way in.

'She 'ere?'

Carrie froze. 'Len.'

'Yep, that's me. Got me name right didn't you. Is me wife here. She needs to come home. She's needed.' On hearing the commotion in the hall Tommy left the sitting room followed by Elsie who had recognised her husband's voice. Tommy tried to push her back into the sitting room but she stood her ground.

'No, Tommy. Let me speak to him.'

Len peered round Carrie and spoke to Elsie using a wheedling tone. 'What you doin' here, darlin', I thought we were spending Christmas Eve together.' He glanced at Carrie. 'Or are we both invited for the evening's entertainment?'

'No, 'fraid not' said Carrie firmly.

'Just as I thought. Come on now, Elsie, you've had your fun. Let's get home. It's freezing out here.' Elsie didn't answer. 'Elsie,' Len said, firmer this time, gritting his teeth. 'We've got guests. They're waiting for you...us.'

Elsie pushed her way forward, past Tommy, and stood next to

Carrie.

'I'm having a night off, Len. One night that's all. I'll be back for business tomorrow afternoon. Rose is here. She's staying with her aunt and tomorrow is Christmas Day and I'm going to be here.'

'Did we discuss this?'

'No, we didn't but it was a spur of the moment thing, and you weren't at the house so I didn't think it would make no never mind to you whether I was there or not.'

'Except you're meant to be working.'

Tommy stood behind Elsie and Carrie. 'Not tonight she isn't mate. She's just told you she's staying here with her family. She said she'll be back tomorrow, unless of course I have anything to do with it.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning that if she wants to stay here for good she can.'

Len frowned. 'She's my missus and I'll think you'll find she has to do what she's told.'

'Shut the door, Carrie,' said Tommy. 'I'm bored with this conversation. Go home, Len. Maybe *you* could see to your...guests.' Len pushed forward and tried to get to Elsie but Tommy stood in front of her. When they were both standing in the hall, Len barely came up to Tommy's shoulder. 'So, Len. You want to take this further?'

'I ain't scared of no cripple.'

Tommy laughed and bent down to look in his eyes. 'Well, you look scared. Now get lost you little weasel.'

'Here, Len. You got problems?' Carrie looked past Len and saw Arnold standing by the railings. Her heart sank and she wondered what she'd done to deserve everything that was happening at her front door on what was supposed to be the most peaceful night of the year. 'What's up, won't they let you in? It's alright mate, I have the same trouble and the house is half mine.'

Len turned on his heel and stared at Arnold. 'And what the hell's it got to do with you? I don't know you from Adam.'

Carrie watched as Arnold's face blanched. 'Look, I came to see my wife. I don't want no trouble.'

'Then get your nose out of my business.' Arnold nodded and stepped back, shoving his hands in his pockets and lowering his eyes to the pavement. 'Who are you, anyway?'

Arnold glanced up, clearly scared of Len West whose reputation was well known in Whitechapel. 'Her husband,' he said, lifting his chin to Carrie.

'So what you doing standing out here sticking your nose in my business?'

Arnold cleared his throat. 'Long story.'

Len sneered. 'It always is, mate. Tell you what, come back with

me. Got something at my place that'll interest you.'

Arnold looked flustered, knowing exactly what Len was alluding to. 'Nah, it's alright. Got some business here.'

'You've got no business here,' said Tommy. 'You've been told, you're not welcome here, neither of you are welcome. Just get lost the pair of you before I call the police.'

Len ignored him and stared at Elsie. 'You get your arse back home within the hour. You've got clients waiting. They're queuing outside the front door and it don't look good. You've got a job to do.'

'Not tonight, Len,' said Elsie. 'I'm staying here. I told you, I'm here for Rose. I'll be back tomorrow.'

Len West narrowed his eyes, his pupils as black as flint, his gaze as cold as a snake's.

'You made a bad decision there, Elsie. Lost me money, and when I lose money I don't like it.' He stepped away from the front of the house and stood on the pavement looking up at the windows on the other floors. 'Nice place this. Be a shame if it burnt down.'

Carrie gripped the door even tighter. Len West was threatening them and when he made a threat you listened. She turned her attention to Arnold who was staring at Len, clearly shaken by the threat, that if carried out would leave Arnold with nothing.

'You should go, Arnold. You won't get anything here.'

As she finished speaking Joshka and Benjamin appeared in the hallway, their faces hard with anger.

'What is this?' Joshka asked. 'Who is this man?'

'The taller one is the bloke I told you about, Carrie's husband, the one she left in India but who unfortunately decided to come back to London,' answered Tommy. 'He wants the house.'

Joshka made his way to Carrie's side and lifted his chin to Arnold. 'Why do you come here wanting? You have no right to demand anything from her,' he shouted at Arnold. 'You should go...or we make you go.'

'Mind your own sodding business,' said Arnold. 'I own half this house and I'm not permitted to step across the threshold yet you're the dregs from another country sucking us all dry and you're living here. It's not right.' He turned his attention to Carrie. 'But I'm going to put it right. I'm going to get it sorted out and you and that brat of yours will be out on your ear. I'll make sure of it.'

Joshka ran down the steps and grabbed Arnold by the front of his shirt, gritting his teeth and pushing his face towards him. 'You can't speak to me like that. You have no right to speak to me like that. No one gives Joshka Weiss anything. I work, I work for everything. You will regret it, *I'll* make sure of that.' He pushed Arnold away from him. Arnold slipped on the snow and fell into the gutter, leaving him

sprawling in the slush. He floundered before hauling himself up, water dripping from his clothes.

‘And you’ll regret that, you bastard.’ He glared at Carrie. ‘This another one of your blokes is it? They’re like flies around a jam pot. Didn’t take you long did it? Does the other one know about him, y’know, the one in the loony bin. Well, if he doesn’t he soon will. I’ll make sure of that as well.’ He turned to Len who had been watching the unfolding events with some amusement. ‘Come on, mate. Let’s go to the pub,’ cajoled Arnold, his face like thunder. ‘I’ll get you a whiskey. All me mates are in France and I don’t want to be drinking alone on Christmas Eve.’ Len raised his chin then nodded as Arnold pointed a finger at Carrie. ‘Lucky old you, Carrie Bateman. I came here to do some damage tonight but it looks like my new friend here,’ at this he slung his arm around Len’s shoulders, ‘has given you a bit of a reprieve...for now. I’ll be back tomorrow. Get the brandy out. I want a deal.’

Carrie swallowed down her fear and tried to look as though she was in control. ‘It’s Christmas Day tomorrow. You won’t be welcome. You’ll never be welcome here.’

‘Then I’ve got nothing to lose have I, lady?’ He sneered at her. ‘Merry Christmas, Mrs Bateman.’

Carrie, Tommy and Elsie watched Len and Arnold until they got to the corner of Nightingale Lane and couldn’t be seen anymore through the falling snow.

‘We’re going out, Carrie, is it alright?’ said Joshka. ‘We are meeting some of the Silver Street workers at the pub because we will not see them again. Our work there is finished and we go back to Belgium next week. I hope...I hope it is customary for us to go out on such a festive night.’

‘Oh, Joshka of course it is. This is your home for now. You must come and go as you please.’ The men thanked her with a smile and went out into the cold, the vapour of their breath trailing behind them as they hurried down the street.

Carrie closed the door with a click and she and her brother and sister were silent as they went back into the sitting room.

‘Fancy him coming here,’ said Elsie. ‘That man. He won’t be happy ‘til he’s been the death of me.’

‘All the more reason for you to stay with us,’ said Tommy. ‘What do you think will happen when you go back to Buck’s Row? The only present you’ll get from him is a black eye and a broken face.’

‘I can talk him round.’

‘Is that right? Well, you didn’t do so well just now.’

Elsie sat down in front of the fire and sighed heavily. ‘Can we leave it? I want to enjoy my time here, I don’t know when I’ll be back again.’

I know what he'll do but it won't be the first time and it won't be the last.'

Carrie filled everyone's glasses again, her heart still thumping hard in her chest.

'That was awful. What a way to spend Christmas Eve. It's meant to be the most peaceful night of the year. I'm just thankful the children didn't see it.' She closed her eyes and sighed. 'I just want some quiet.' Just as she was about to sit down the door knocked again. 'Please don't let that be him again. I've had enough for one night.'

'I'll go,' said Ida. 'I'll see him off. He can't stand me and the feeling's mutual.' Carrie heard the door open and she held her breath, then heard Ida's voice welcoming someone into the hall. 'It's your Pa, Carrie and Tommy, and Alfie's with him,' she cried.

Carrie opened her eyes and smiled. 'Thank goodness.'



WHEN ARTHUR AND ALFIE had eaten, they and the others gathered around the Christmas tree and toasted each other, with a special mention for Florrie, then placed presents under the tree in readiness for Christmas morning. Carrie's thoughts went to how she had arrived at this place in her life, that she was now a mother of a little boy she loved with all her heart, the owner of the house in Nightingale Lane where she once worked as a lowly scullery maid, and she wondered what the future would bring for them all. She glanced around at the joyous faces glowing in the candlelight. You all look so happy, she thought, yet you've all been through so much. A great deal has happened to us and so much courage has had to be found, not just to get through it, but to believe there's good in the world as well as bad.

'Another toast,' she said. They all raised their glasses in anticipation. 'To the boys at the front. To all the young men who have graced our home with their presence and to all those who will never see our shores again. We think of you on this Christmas Eve and send you our love, our best wishes for you and your families, and our deepest gratitude.'



Chapter 63



ELSIE WAS UP BEFORE anyone else in the house. She had slept with Carrie in her bed and they had felt like sisters, talking about the past, reminiscing about their childhood and wondering what the future held for them.

‘We never did this,’ Elsie had said. ‘It was always you and Tommy.’

Carrie had giggled, her mood buoyed up by the sherry she had drunk before finally going to bed. ‘Tommy? Ugh, I’d never have got into bed with him, or Alfie for that matter, dirty little ikes.’

Elsie had laughed out loud, drawing her knees up to her stomach and howling. ‘I know. Didn’t they smell horrible.’

‘Yeah, what was that?’

‘Just...muck, I s’pose. Florrie was never that bothered about sending them to the washhouse was she? They both got away with murder, stinky little buggers.’

‘But you were closer to her, Elsie. You were the ladylike one. The one she was proudest of.’

‘Yeah, and look at me now.’ They glanced at each other and burst into laughter again, until Tommy knocked and put his head round the door.

‘You two ever going to sleep?’

‘I think we had too much sherry,’ Carrie said, still giggling.

‘I think *you* did. You should sleep soon though. Busy day tomorrow.’

‘Alright, Pa,’ said Elsie, which set her and Carrie off again.

‘I need to go out for some cigarettes,’ said Tommy. ‘I forgot them earlier and I can’t be without me cigs tomorrow and there probably won’t be anywhere open. I’ll go to The Ship Tavern to get them so I won’t be long. They’ve got a lock-in tonight so I know they’ll let me in.’

‘Yeah, but they might not let you out,’ said Elsie. ‘They’ll want you to spend your money.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll be up bright and early tomorrow. It’s you two I’m worried about.’



ELSIE HAD WANTED TO get up first because she wanted to have the opportunity to walk around the house without anyone watching her. She wanted to get to know it, feel the atmosphere in the rooms without other people around her, even if they were family. To pick up and look at the things that made Carrie happy, the little ornaments, the gifts of thanks she'd received from some of the boys she'd nursed back to health, the funny little things John had made her with help from Dotty and Seraphina. In essence she wanted to get to know her sister as an adult, to put aside their thoughts of each other when they were children and living in the circumstances they faced, which even with Elsie's life the way it was now, she knew had been difficult for their parents.

She'd often wondered why Florrie and Arthur had had four kids, four more mouths to feed, four more backs to clothe, but had realised they probably hadn't had a choice in it. She'd also worked out that Florrie had probably been pregnant with her when she married Arthur. She'd looked at the date of their wedding and then her birthday and realised that she had either been six weeks early or Florrie had had a bun in the oven when she walked down the aisle. She'd asked Florrie about it and she'd shrugged and given her a look which had more or less confirmed it for Elsie. Not that it matters, she'd thought to herself. None of that matters anymore. She's gone, and I never got to say goodbye. That was my fault. There's no one else to blame.

She frowned to herself as she strolled around the living room, fingering the damask pink velvet curtains and the tasselled tiebacks, running her hand across the dust free dresser where Carrie had displayed her favourite things, the gifts she'd received for doing something good for someone else. I could have done things differently, she thought. I can see that now. I could have gone home, left Len and taken Rose with me, but I was so sure he would give me a glamorous life, I thought *he* was glamorous. She silently shook her head and momentarily closed her eyes, the image of him not the way she'd seen him when they'd first met, the cocky good-looking guy with all the answers. Now it was distorted, smudged, disfigured with distrust. How could I have let him make me do those things, she thought. Those awful things with all those other men who only wanted to be with me because they could pay. Most of them were married men who weren't getting what they thought they deserved at home, many of them old enough to know better who were mourning the loss of their youth and wanted a bit of fun. Sometimes that fun came at a cost. She rubbed

the back of her neck and sighed.

She could ask herself the question as many times as she liked but the answer was always the same. She knew why. It was because she thought she was better than a Dobbs, better than the family she'd been born into and lived with, better than a girl who lived in a backstreet slum whose diet consisted of tripe, vegetables picked up off the ground when the markets had closed, and a beef bone from the butchers if her mother could get it.

'I thought I was better,' she said to herself under her breath. 'I thought I deserved better and I made Len take notice of me, made him want me because I knew he was the only man who had anything, even if he didn't come by what he had in what other people thought was an acceptable way. It's my fault. It's all my fault.'

'Elsie?' Elsie was startled by a voice from the sitting room door. Pearl was standing in the opening. 'Are you alright?' Pearl looked into the room. 'I thought there was someone in here with you?'

Elsie shook her head. 'I was talking to myself.'

'Oh. Right.' Pearl frowned. 'Want a cuppa?'

'Yeah, yeah, thanks,' she replied, following Pearl into the kitchen. 'You're up early?'

'I know. I got used to hospital hours. They had us up at the crack of dawn. Even if you were dying they still wanted you up and washed before the doctors came round.'

Elsie sat at the table while Pearl made the tea. 'Must have been awful.' Pearl nodded. 'And scary.'

'It's funny, I wasn't really scared for me. I thought if I died it was because it was meant to happen, my time, but not Eliza. She hasn't had a chance to make her mark on life yet. I wanted her to live more than anything.'

Elsie sighed. 'I can understand that. They mean everything don't they?'

'I didn't realise how much.' Pearl poured them both a breakfast mug of tea and they sat warming their hands on them. 'What will you do, Elsie? Will you stay? Tommy and Carrie want you to, and I know Arthur wants you to stay too. Wouldn't you consider it?'

Elsie chuckled. 'Do you think I'd fit in here? What about when people find out who I am and what I did for a living? What do you think would happen if I opened the front door and realised one of the neighbours was one of my customers?'

Pearl shrugged. 'I don't think they care about that, Elsie. They know what Len West is like, everyone knows what he's like. Aren't you worried about what he'll do if you go back to Buck's Row?'

'Yes, I'm worried, but he's my husband, Pearl. That must mean something. I'm married to the bloke which gives me,' she shrugged, 'I

duhno, some say over things. I'm not sure I'm ready to walk away yet.'

'Not even for Rose.'

'She's who I'm doing it for. I promised her didn't I, a cottage, for her and me, far away from everyone else. No Len, no madam, no maid, and no tarts. Just her and me.'

Pearl suddenly caught on. 'You're putting money away.' Elsie pulled a small smile and nodded. 'Is it safe?'

'I'd better hope so, because if Len finds it I'm the headline in tomorrow's newspaper.'

Carrie woke with a start. She could hear the sound of someone playing the piano, and for a moment couldn't work out where she was or what day it was. She lay back on the pillows and put a hand to her forehead. There was a pain across her eyes and she realised for the first time ever she was suffering from the effects of the previous night's sherry.

'Elsie, you're a bad influence,' she murmured as she swung her legs out of bed. She pulled the curtain aside. Broad daylight. 'Oh, hell. What's the time?' she gasped, picking up the clock from her bedside, and seeing it was gone eight, swiftly banged the clock down on the cabinet and hastily got dressed. 'Why didn't someone wake me?' she cried as she washed quickly then fixed her hair.

She ran down the two flights of stairs and went into the kitchen. It was empty. The range was lit, and from its oven the smell of a roasting turkey filled the room making her mouth water even at that early hour. The big copper pot was on the range, bubbling gently with porridge and Carrie could see that everyone had had their share.

In the hall she made for the front sitting room and found the others, bowls of porridge on their laps, listening to Arthur playing Christmas carols on the piano.

'Morning sleepy head,' said Tommy as she sat beside Ida. 'Or is it afternoon?'

Carrie pulled a face at him. 'You should have woken me.'

'We didn't want to wake you,' said Elsie. 'You were snoring away, deep in the land of nod.'

Carrie's mouth dropped open. 'I don't snore.'

Elsie's eyes widened. 'Er, yes you do. Like one of them trains what run under the ground.' Everyone laughed and Carrie grinned.

'Want some porridge?' asked Ida. 'I've taken the boys who stayed theirs. Elsie helped me. And Hannah and Alitza and the others will be down later. They don't celebrate in the same way we do, so they're giving us time to open our presents.'

'I bought presents for Lila and Rebekah,' said Carrie, frowning. 'I hope they won't be upset.'

'Oh, I shouldn't think so. They're just children, aren't they? And

maybe we could say they're farewell presents. I must admit I bought them something too.'

'Oh, Ida,' said Carrie, rubbing the kindly woman's arm with affection. 'That was good of you.'

'I'll get that porridge.'

'No, Ida, sit there, I'll get it. You're part of the family, you don't have to run around after us.'

Carrie went back into the kitchen and Elsie followed her.

'Thanks for today, Carrie. It's like old times, only better.'

Carrie ladled porridge from the pot into a china bowl and sat at the table. 'I wish you'd change your mind and stay with us. We're all worried about you going back to Buck's Row. Len West isn't the type to take the snub you gave him lying down is he?'

'No, I'm the one who he wants to lie down.' She grinned and Carrie shook her head, grinning in return. 'Anyway I've got reasons for going back. I've made a decision about it and I think it's what you want. When the time is right I'm going to leave him. Seeing him at the door yesterday opened my eyes. He couldn't care less about Rose, and even less about me. I'm just someone he uses, like all the other girls, to make money. It's all he cares about.' She sat down and leant towards Carrie. 'The thing is, I don't want you to think I want charity from you.' Carrie started to protest and Elsie held up her hand. 'Let me finish. Since you came to see me I've realised that I'm still part of a family, even after everything I've done. I'm a whore, Carrie, someone who other women wouldn't give the drippings from their nose. I'm a nothing, a no one, and all the time I live in Whitechapel it's all I'll ever be. One day I'll move out. I'll come and get Rose and we'll move away where we can start again. You and Tommy and Dad will know where I am, but you're the only ones who'll know. I'll do it for Rose. She's the important one.'

Carrie gently placed a hand on one of Elsie's. 'If I can help you, Elsie, I will. Don't do it all alone. You're my sister and I don't care what you've had to do, Len West made you do it. If you had had a choice you wouldn't have lived that life, but you didn't. Let me and Tommy help you. And Dad. We'll do all we can.'

Elsie nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. 'I know,' she said in a whisper. 'I know.'

The presents were undone, the wrappings whisked away, and Rose and John were sitting on the rug playing with their new toys. Arthur had bought Rose a dolly as he had promised and it hadn't left her side since she'd unwrapped it.

'Thanks, Pa,' said Elsie. 'She's so happy. I don't think I've ever seen her so happy. And Carrie, those lovely doll's clothes.' Elsie shook her head and wiped away a tear. 'This is the life I want for her,' she

whispered. 'This life.'

Carrie grabbed her hand. 'And you'll get it too. One way or another. I don't know what you've got planned but...you'll get there.'

Later they all sat around the huge table in the dining room, decorated with tiny Christmas ornaments and an angel candelabra in the centre. The family were joined by Gregor and Alitza, Benjamin and Hannah and their girls, Lila and Rebekah, and Joshka. Hannah and Alitza had taken over the kitchen when Ida had gone to Buck's Row, and produced some dishes of their own to add to the feast. The table groaned with Christmas treats. Sitting between them were three soldiers who had been unable to return home for Christmas. Tommy and Joshka had helped them down the stairs and they, along with everyone else, wore the paper hats that Lila and Rebekah had made for the festivities.

'You've done us proud, Ida,' Arthur said to her. 'I've never seen food like it. We never had anything like this at home, did we Carrie, Elsie and Tommy? And look at Alfie, he can't take his eyes off it all.' Carrie had noticed that Alfie hadn't been able to take his eyes away from Rebekah either, but she didn't say anything for fear of embarrassing him and Rebekah. Rebekah was a beautiful girl with long dark hair that today she wore without a scarf. It fell down her back like a chestnut-coloured waterfall. Her eyes were the same dark brown and fringed with long lashes. Carrie wondered if she knew that Alfie admired her and she remembered when she was Rebekah's age. She was already in love with Johan when she was sixteen.

'It's my pleasure, Arthur,' said Ida, flushing a little under everyone's gaze. 'I love my cooking.' She looked around at them all. 'Get stuck in then,' she said, laughing. 'or it'll go cold and then I won't be happy.'

Dishes were passed from hand to hand, the chink of bottle against glass, laughter when gravy was spilt on the white tablecloth, and everyone chatting as they tucked into the best meal of the year.

'You wouldn't think there was a war on,' said Arthur. He raised a glass to the three lads that sat with them. 'But you know better than any of us. I'm proud to sit and eat with you and I wish you and your mates the very best. Stay safe and get as many of them Bosch as you can.'

'Dad,' cried Carrie. She stared at him, but then burst into laughter at the sight of his flushed cheeks and everyone joined in, even the soldiers.

'That beer's loosened your tongue, Arthur,' said Ida. 'I don't reckon that's something you'd say on any other day, but you're just sayin' what we all think. Good on you.'

Arthur put his hand on Alfie's shoulder. 'I'm praying they'll call an

end to it before this one gets to France. I can't believe he's going to war.' He looked up at everyone sitting around the table, his eyes glassy and moist with tears. 'And we must remember that there are young men we call the enemy who are just like my son, the youngest in the family, the baby whose parents don't want them to go to war either. I'm sure I'm not the only one, neither here nor in Germany.'

Alfie stared at him. 'I'm not a baby, Dad. I'm a full-grown man.' His eyes flicked over to Rebekah and Carrie saw a small smile playing on her lips.

'You'll need to be, mate,' one of the soldiers said. 'It gets rough over there.'

Carrie looked from one to the other. 'Well, we're all here now. Let's enjoy today together. We know we're the lucky ones and our thoughts are with all of them, wherever they come from, who aren't so lucky.'

'Quite right,' said Ida.

Later, when everything had been cleared away and Arthur had resumed his place at the piano, they sang Christmas carols and ate Kletskepje, sweet biscuits made by Alitza.

'I like these, Mama,' John said as he tucked into a third biscuit.

Carrie laughed. 'I can see you do, John, but that's the last one until teatime.'

John and Rose, Lila and Rebekah played a game with a board and counters and Ida and Elsie brought in glasses of hot spiced wine before they settled down for a peaceful evening in front of the fire.

'I wish Florrie was here,' Arthur said as settled back onto the large squashy chair nearest the fire. 'I don't know why she couldn't have let herself go and put her stubbornness behind her and let us all be a family.'

'We'll never know, Dad,' said Tommy, 'and it doesn't matter now, does it? It's a shame you missed out but you're here now and I hope you've made the decision to stay, at least for a few weeks.'

'I'll have to get my stuff,' Arthur said as he took another sip of piping hot spiced wine.

Carrie sat forward, a grin across her face. 'So, you *will* stay, Dad? You'll stay at Nightingale Lane?'

Arthur nodded. 'I can't see it doing any harm. You've said you'll keep the house in Hanbury Street on for me for a while, and that'll be my safety net in case I change my mind. And if I do it's nothing against you. It'll be because I've lost the thoughts and memories of your mother. That's all.' Carrie sat back, satisfied at last. That Arthur had chosen to stay, even if just for a while, was a step forward. It meant she could hope to persuade him to stay for good. She wanted her Dad with her, so she could be sure he was safe. He deserved that

at least.

Her reverie was interrupted by a loud rapping on the front door.

'Who on earth can that be? On Christmas night and all, and it's chucking it down outside.'

'I'll go,' Tommy said, putting his drink on the dresser. 'It might be that arsehole, Len West again. Come for Elsie.'

'I'm not ready to leave yet,' she said, tipping the contents of her glass into her mouth. 'He'll have a long wait ahead of him. Hope he's got an umbrella.'

Tommy went to the door and gingerly opened it, hoping there wouldn't be a repeat of his confrontation with Len the night before. The last thing he wanted was to get involved with him. Len West had a habit of getting arrested...and so did the blokes he came up against.

A woman stood on the step, dressed in a policewoman's uniform, her black cloak sodden by heavy rain that had replaced the snow and almost washed it away from the streets leaving them dank and mucky with the usual grime. Tommy, taken aback, couldn't speak and stared at her for a few moments, his mind whirring.

'Sir?'

'Er, can I help you? Officer?'

'Yes, sir, I am an officer of the law. I'm looking for Mrs Carrie Bateman. This is her home?'

'Yes, yes it is.'

'Can I come in then? I'm getting soaked out here.'

'Yes, sorry, please, come in. I just wasn't expecting... It might be best if I show you into the kitchen. It's warm in there. I'll tell her you're here.' He showed her into the kitchen, unsure of what to do. 'Would you like to sit down?'

'I'll stand, sir, if it's all the same to you.'

'Fair enough.'

Moments later Carrie joined the police officer in the kitchen, her face pale, her eyebrows knotted in a frown as she couldn't fathom why the police would be calling on her on Christmas Day.

'Officer? How can I be of help?'

'I'm sorry to interrupt your Christmas Day, Mrs. Bateman. My name is Officer Dawlish. I'm with the station in Brick Lane.' She reached into her top pocket and pulled out a notebook. 'You are Mrs Carrie Bateman, the wife of Mr Arnold Bateman?'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes,' she said in a whisper, her mind in turmoil, her frown deepening.

'I'm sorry, Mrs Bateman, but your husband's body was found in the yard of the Olde Angel Public House this morning.' The officer swallowed. 'I'm afraid he's dead, Mrs Bateman.'

Carrie reached for the back of a chair as the room swam around

her. Her breath got stuck in her throat and she thought she was going to be sick. 'Tommy!' she cried. 'Tommy, Dad!'

Tommy and Arthur rushed into the kitchen, and when he saw Carrie's distress Tommy grabbed her to stop her falling and sat her in a chair.

'Put your head between your knees, Carrie.' She held onto him as he got down onto his haunches in front of her and glanced at the officer. 'What the hell's happened, Officer? Can you tell me please?'

'Well, um, Mrs Bateman's husband was found dead behind the Olde Angel Public House in Whitechapel Road this morning,' she opened her notebook again, 'at about half past eleven. He had received a blow on the back of the head with an instrument yet to be identified.'

'Arnold Bateman's dead?'

Arthur stood by the door with his hands in his pockets. 'Well, it's no loss to the world.'

'I'm not sure that's the best thing to say under the circumstances, Dad,' Tommy said, rolling his eyes.

'Just saying.'

'What happens now,' Tommy asked the officer. 'You're saying he was murdered?'

'Oh, yes. It was the blow that killed him.'

'Will you need to question my sister?'

'Yes, but not until tomorrow. We have some leads we need to follow up, but someone will be in touch with Mrs Bateman.'

'Thank you, Officer. Shall I see you out?'

'No, I think Mrs Bateman needs some attention. I can find my own way out.'

They sat together in the sitting room, quiet now, not one of them knowing what to say. Hannah and Benjamin had taken their daughters up to the attic flat, joined by Joshka, Alitza and Gregor. No one in the Dobbs family mourned Arnold Bateman. Arthur had never spoken a truer word when he said his death was no loss to the world, but no one wanted to acknowledge it.

'I can't believe it,' said Carrie. She put her hand to her cheek. 'Have you any idea how many times I've wished for him to be...and now he is. Was it me? Did I wish it so much that it happened? If it was I'll never be forgiven will I? The good Lord will never forgive me.'

Ida sat next to her and put an arm around her. 'Now, now, Carrie, you're being silly. Don't get yourself all upset now. Bateman was not a popular person in Whitechapel was he? Too arrogant for his own good. Seems like he got himself mixed up in something and he came off worse.'

'Left here with Len, didn't he?' said Elsie. 'Maybe they got involved

in something.'

They all stared at her. 'You think it was Len?' said Pearl. 'No one would be surprised would they if it was him who did it?'

'He'd need a reason. I know Len. He wouldn't put himself in the frame for something unless he thought it was worth it. He's much too canny for that. He'd have to have gained from it in some way, and as far as I know, he's never killed anyone.'

'There's a first time for everything,' said Tommy. 'I know they left here together looking as thick as thieves but that doesn't mean much. Len didn't like Bateman sticking his nose in his business. Maybe they argued.'

Elsie got up and stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray.

'I'm going back.'

'What?'

'Look, Tommy, he's my husband. I need to know, and I will know. Everyone has a tell. If he lies to me I'll know.'

'You're not going to ask him, surely?' said Carrie. 'He's already threatened you. If you put him on the spot he might lash out and you'll be body number two found behind a pub somewhere.'

She shrugged and went into the hall to get her coat and hat, the red feathers looking worse for wear. 'He won't do me so much damage that I won't be able to work. My gentleman friends don't like bruises on their girls. He's not that stupid. If he puts me out of action I can't earn.'

Carrie rose from her chair and went across to Elsie. She looked into her sister's eyes and then put her arms around her and hugged her.

'I'm going to ask you not to go but I know you won't listen.'

'I have to go, Carrie. I told you, I've got my reasons but I promise I'll keep in touch. I'll get a message to you somehow. Maybe we could meet up somewhere for a cuppa.'

'I'd like that.' Carrie released her and kissed her on the cheek.

'I won't say goodbye to Rose. She's happy playing with the other children and I'd like to keep it that way.'

Carrie nodded. 'Alright, Elsie. Me and Tommy'll see you out.'

At the door Elsie turned on the step and smiled at them both. 'I'll never forget today and what you're doing for Rose. I can't tell you how much it means to me. Keep her safe. She's all I've got.'

'Course we will, Elsie. Just keep yourself safe, that's all we ask,' Tommy said, giving her a hug. He and Carrie watched as Elsie walked the length of Nightingale Lane and turned the corner. Carrie sighed as they pushed the door shut.

'I'm worried, Tommy.'

Tommy nodded 'So am I, Sis.'



CARRIE RUBBED HER HAND across Rose's forehead as the little girl snuggled sleepily into the bedcovers clutching her new doll closely to her. The little girl's eyelashes fluttered with tiredness. She'd sobbed when she'd realised Elsie was no longer at Nightingale Lane and both Carrie and Pearl had done their best to comfort her, although they both knew there was no comfort when a child wanted the mother who was the most important person in their life.

'I hope she's made the right decision,' whispered Pearl as she'd pulled Rose onto her lap and cuddled her. 'That bloke, he's not to be trusted.'

Carrie nodded and nervously pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. 'I know. Oh, my God, Pearl, what if he killed Arnold?'

'It must have been him. Who else could it have been? We don't know anyone else like that do we?'

'We don't, but there are plenty in Whitechapel who would have done it, particularly if they found out about...well, you know. Some men hate that sort of thing.'

'It's a mystery but no doubt the police will get to the bottom of it.'

'The force is made up mostly of women these days and we know what we're like. Like dogs with rags, aren't we? We never give up.'

Well, whoever it is he'll be wishing he'd walked away by the time they get hold of him.'

'He?'

Pearl's eyes had widened. 'Why, you don't think it could have been a woman do you?'

Carrie shrugged. 'Why not? We're just as capable. The officer said an instrument had been used. Anyone can use a hammer or a crowbar, or anything else if necessary. Yes, I think it could have been a woman just as easily as a man.'



JOHN STIRRED AND CARRIE went across to his bed.

'Mama,' he said sleepily.

'Yes, I'm here,' she said as she tucked the eiderdown around him.

'Is Rose here?'

'She's here too.' He nodded and smiled, satisfied that his playmate hadn't left with Elsie. A wave of anxiety went through Carrie as Arnold appeared in her mind's eye. The man who had caused her so much pain and heartache was dead, but she couldn't rejoice at someone's death. Someone had deliberately taken his life and the

thought of it chilled her to the bone. She wondered what the circumstances had been and why his body was found behind a public house. She knew the pub, knew it was popular with the inhabitants of Whitechapel, but no one ever went to the back, why would they? It was like a waste ground where the owners kept the rubbish bins and the used barrels, like in lots of pubs. Why would Arnold have been out there? Tommy had alluded to the way he lived his life and she wondered if this was why. Men like Arnold had to remain hidden, keep themselves below the parapet so they wouldn't be discovered. Is this what happened to him?

John's breathing had slowed and he was fast asleep. Carrie rose from his bed and went across to the window. It had poured with rain all day and had all but melted the snow. What was left was an unpleasant looking slush mixed with the grime from the feet of passers-by and mud from horses hooves. A movement at the corner of her vision took her attention and she turned towards it. There was someone there, standing as far back in the shadows of the house opposite as they could. A curl of smoke slowly ascended into the dark, and then the bright orange glow of the end of a cigarette as it was drawn on. Carrie's heart began to beat like the paradiddle of a drummer boy. Is it him, she thought.

Her need for David overwhelmed her and she allowed her head to drop in her despair, not caring if he saw her there. When she raised her face again there he was, standing in the street. David, looking up at the house, his eyes on her. She stared at him, then smiled and raised her hand in a wave. He smiled and nodded, then stepped back into the shadows. Carrie turned and ran out of the room, through her bedroom and sitting room, then down the two flights of stairs. When she got to the hall she made for the front door, its weight banging against the wall as she opened it.

She ran out onto the street, blind to the rain soaking her hair and clothes.

'David,' she called. 'David.'

She stared into the darkness, her vision slowly getting used to the gloom until she realised he wasn't there. Her shoulders drooped and her head fell forward as she realised she was too late. He was gone. She felt someone put a shawl around her shoulders, and then a pair of strong arms as Ida walked her back inside and shut the door behind them. 'He was there, Ida,' she said, her voice breaking. 'He was there, I saw him.'

'I know, ducky. You'd know him anywhere.'

'He disappeared before I could get to him. He doesn't want to talk to me, does he?'

'He will. He will, Carrie. When he's ready.'



Chapter 64



‘WHAT ABOUT DOLORES,’ said Carrie the following morning as she and Ida prepared breakfast for the soldiers.

‘Do you think she knows?’

‘God, I don’t know. I was thinking I should go and see her but if she doesn’t know yet I don’t want to be the one to tell her.’

‘Poor woman. I know he was a wrong ‘un, but no one wants to hear news like that.’

‘She doesn’t have anyone else as far as I know.’

‘I could come with you. If you want me to.’

‘Would you, Ida? If she doesn’t know about Arnold I’d appreciate your help.’



PRATT STREET LOOKED even worse in the rain. The fronts of the houses were sodden where water had seeped behind the flaking paintwork and got into the wood, and most of them had gutters that weren’t fit for purpose. Landlords weren’t bothered about the aesthetics of the houses they owned, just the money they would bring in.

‘Ooh, dear,’ said Ida. ‘And I thought I had it bad when I lived in Spitalfields, but this is awful.’

‘Have you never been here before, then?’ Carrie asked her.

‘No, and with a bit of luck I won’t need to come back here. She needs to find somewhere else doesn’t she? After what’s happened. What number is she?’

‘Thirteen.’

‘Oh, my goodness, it gets worse.’

As soon as the door was opened Carrie knew Dolores had heard the news.

‘Oh, Carrie,’ she sobbed. ‘Whatever did he do to deserve having his head bashed in?’

Carrie glanced at Ida whose mouth was a straight line. 'I know, Dolores. I'm so sorry. You must be heartbroken.'

Dolores pulled the door open as far it would go and beckoned them into the front room. Ida glanced round at the room, neater and tidier than she'd expected, but put together with the shabbiest of things. 'Can I make you a cup of tea, missus,' Ida asked Dolores. 'A cuppa makes everything a bit better, and I don't s'pose you've had many visitors.'

'That would be lovely, Mrs...??'

'Coyle. Ida Coyle. You can call me Ida.'

'You're right, I've had no visitors. I've got no family to care about Arnold, or me for that matter.'

'What about Arnold's aunt and uncle?' asked Carrie. 'He spoke about them.'

'On his father's side. They couldn't stand me.'

Carrie glanced away. 'Oh.'

The three women sat nursing the cups of tea that Ida made. Conversation was stilted and Carrie willed the meeting to be swiftly over.

'What will you do now?' Carrie asked Dolores. 'Would you want to say here?'

Dolores looked surprised at the question. 'I'm not sure what else I can do, Carrie. Where could I go? This is our home, my home. I've not got much coming in...to be honest Arnold kept me poor, never really paid his way. I've had to rely on charity for years and I expect I will 'till the day I die. There aren't many prospects in the offing.'



CARRIE AND IDA WALKED down Pratt Street in silence until they got to the corner and Ida spotted a teashop over the other side of the road.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's go in there and have a decent cup of tea. Dolores milk was on the turn, did you notice? It smelt horrible. And I could murder one of them cream slice things. Come on, Carrie. My treat.'

Carrie silently followed Ida across the road and they got a small round table covered in a pristine white cloth in the window where they could watch people go by.

'That was awful,' said Carrie.

'Poor woman, losing her son like that, but I get the feeling Dolores Bateman might be one of those people you can't help no matter what you do for her. Do you know what I mean?'

'Determined for life to be difficult.'

'Yes,' Ida answered as she poured tea from a teapot decorated with

rosebuds. 'You might need to be careful there.'

Carrie picked up her cup and gingerly sipped at the hot tea. 'Why?' 'You're the only person with a connection to her.'

'Right.' Carrie put her cup down on the saucer with a chink. 'I'll do what I can, Ida. I'll always do what I can, you know that.'

Ida nodded. 'I know you will, but don't let her become a burden. That's my advice. You've got enough on your plate. And you're a widow now.'

'Blimey, I hadn't thought of that. I am aren't I? A widow.'

'And you'll get his army pension.'

'Will I?' Ida nodded. 'Should I give it to Dolores, d'you think?'

Ida smiled. 'That might be an idea.'



BACK AT THE HOUSE CARRIE waited for the police to call about Arnold. She knew it was something she had to face but the thought of talking about the man she disliked more than anyone in the world concerned her. What if the police realised how much antipathy there was between them? And how many other people knew he was trying to get half of the house. It was motive enough to kill him for some people, or to have him killed. I'm absolutely innocent, she thought, so why do I feel guilty.

She threw herself into her duties, keen to resume the normal working day as soon as she could. The men weren't at work until the following day with it being Boxing Day, so Tommy was at home when the police finally showed up.

'We've been talking to people who knew your husband, Mrs Bateman,' said the elderly police sergeant who was accompanied by the female police officer who had broken the news to Carrie the day before. 'It seems you and him were estranged.'

Carrie nodded. 'Yes, we were.'

'Why?'

'We travelled to India together, Secunderabad, but while we were there we realised the marriage wasn't working so I came back to London and left Arnold in Secunderabad.'

'He wasn't the father of your child?'

'No.'

'Is it necessary to ask her that?' Tommy asked him, interrupting the questioning. 'Why should it matter?'

'We're just trying to get a picture of the relationship between Mr and Mrs Bateman, sir, if you'll allow me to continue.' Tommy leant back, sighing. 'And did Mr Bateman know he wasn't the child's father.' Carrie nodded. 'So that fact didn't cause you any problems.'

‘No.’

The sergeant glanced at Officer Dawlish. ‘Did he have an interest in this house?’

Carrie stared at him not knowing how to answer him. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question. An interest?’

‘Did he own it?’

‘No.’

‘But, surely as your husband...?’

‘I bought this house, Sergeant. I purchased it with money I earned in India from a business I shared with a friend and with the intention of turning it into a convalescence home for injured soldiers, which for the past year and a half has been its purpose.’

‘Did your husband think he had a lawful right to it?’

‘He had recently begun to bother me by calling here and making threats. He wanted me to give him half of the house, saying he had a right to it because he and I had been married, even though we had not lived together for a long time.’

‘Had you consulted a man of legal qualifications?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you would have been ready to dispute his assertions.’

‘Yes.’

‘Even though you took his name and lived as man and wife for a period of time.’

‘We did not.’

The sergeant looked askance for a moment then glanced at Officer Dawlish again. ‘But you said...’

‘I said we were married, Sergeant. I said we went through a marriage ceremony, but we did not live as man and wife.’ The sergeant frowned. ‘I can see you’re confused and I’m sorry but it’s the truth. Living as man and wife means every aspect of marriage doesn’t it We were married, but the marriage was never consummated.’

The sergeant’s face turned the colour of puce and he shuffled his papers about on the table as if not sure where to take the interview from there. ‘Er...’

‘Aren’t you going to ask me why? I would have thought it was the first thing you would have asked.’

‘Alright, Mrs Bateman. Why?’

‘Because my husband did not have an attraction for women, which I didn’t discover until after we were married. His preference was for other men. I unfortunately witnessed this with my own eyes when I found him in our marital bed with a young man. It tolled the funeral bell for our marriage, as I’m sure you understand, Sergeant.’

‘Is that so?’

‘It is.’

‘We have spoken to a young woman of Mr Bateman’s acquaintance who would dispute what you’ve just said, Mrs Bateman. A Miss Betty Baker, who was apparently Mr Bateman’s girlfriend.’

‘It doesn’t prove anything,’ said Tommy. ‘I know Betty Baker. She’s a prostitute. She’ll say anything as long as she’s being paid.’

‘I’m curious as to how you know Miss Baker, Mr Dobbs, but I don’t think Mr Bateman will be paying her anything any time soon, do you?’

‘Had an answer for everything, didn’t he?’ said Tommy as he shut the door behind the officers with a slam.

‘He thinks it was me,’ Carrie said as she wrung her hands together. ‘He thinks I had Arnold killed because he was trying to get his hands on the house.’

‘It doesn’t matter what they think. They have to prove it first.’

‘Tommy I’m scared.’

Tommy guided her into the living room and sat her down. ‘Did you kill him?’ He sunk down onto his haunches in front of her holding onto the arms of the chair.

‘No,’ she cried.

‘Did you get someone else to kill him?’

‘Of course I didn’t.’

He slapped his hands on his thighs. ‘Well there you are then. You’ve got nothing to worry about.’

‘Who the hell is Betty Baker.’

‘A tart from the pub Arnold obviously paid to support his story that he likes women. And you told the officers about Arnold leaving here Christmas Eve with Len West, didn’t you? What’s the betting they’re round there now, grilling Len West about his role in all this. He’ll be at the top of the list of suspects, believe me.’

‘Do you think it was him?’

Tommy shrugged. ‘I dunno, I can’t say I care that much. Arnold Bateman is out of the picture and it’s the best thing that could have happened. He’ll never bother you again, Carrie. Just think, a life without Arnold Bateman doing his best to poison it. Surely part of you is glad about that?’



CARRIE WASN’T CONVINCED with Tommy’s assertion that she had nothing to worry about. She was being truthful of course, but she also knew that sometimes even people who told the absolute truth were not believed, and out of everyone who knew Arnold, surely she had more motive than anyone to want him out of her life.

‘But you’re not a killer, darling,’ said Dorothy when Carrie took her

worries to her. 'Anyone can see that. You wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'I'm not sure about that. There were plenty of times when I wanted rid of him. He was a real thorn in my side, you know that, and other people knew it too. I hadn't made it public but he had. He'd told people that he thought he should own half of the house, even a woman down the pub called Betty Baker who told the police he was her boyfriend.'

Dorothy snorted. 'Betty Baker, eh, and how much had he paid her to say it I wonder.'

'That's what Tommy said.'

'Tommy is correct I should imagine.'

'I hope they don't come back. The police, I mean. I think I look guilty even though I know I'm not. I can feel my face going red and my palms go clammy. It's awful, it really is.'

'Do you think they've questioned Elsie's husband?'

Carrie nodded. 'He's definitely in the frame. Christmas Eve certainly didn't turn out the way I'd planned. Peace and goodwill to all? I don't think so. Even Joshka and Benjamin got involved and I think it would have been much worse if Joshka hadn't pushed Arnold into the gutter. It wasn't just me he threatened. It was John too. Called him something horrible.'

Dorothy went across to the long window in her sitting room and gazed out onto the square, although not really seeing anything. 'Life is hard isn't it, what with one thing and another. There's always something to ruin ones' happiness.'

'Dorothy? There's something wrong, isn't there? What is it? There's me banging on about my own troubles. I'm so sorry.'

'Don't be, darling. It's not as though I didn't know it was going to happen. Marcus has been posted to the Western Front. His training days are over I'm afraid.'

Carrie's face clouded over. 'Oh.'

She was nervous to answer Dorothy because she knew how awful the men had found it on the Western Front, the main theatre of war instigated by the Germans when they invaded Belgium and Luxembourg; the injuries sustained, the fear...the deaths. She'd heard from the young soldiers who had stayed with them at Nightingale Lane about the defences soldiers constructed using sandbags and wood, protecting them with barbed wire to prevent enemy soldiers getting to them. Unfortunately, the defences would become waterlogged leading to soldiers developing trench foot, a fungal infection of the feet. She had seen the effects of it and she shook her head wondering if Marcus would survive one of the most vicious battlegrounds.

'Is there nothing he can do to promote his cause to stay at the

training academy? Why are they sending him now?’

Dorothy turned from the window and returned to her chair, picking up a marble box containing her favourite cocktail cigarettes. She took one from the box and lit it, drawing on it deeply and closing her eyes.

‘They want an end to this war, Carrie. It’s gone on for far too long. Do you remember, they said it would be over by Christmas 1914. We’re about to see 1918 and still it continues. Look at what happened in 1916 in the Battle of Verdun where up to seven hundred thousand men died and the Battle of the Somme, the same year with more than a million casualties. And then there was the Battle of Passchendaele, the battle in Ypres in 1917, with nearly five hundred thousand men taken from their families. The numbers we speak of are momentous...monstrous. One cannot even imagine such great loss. Marcus and those like him are strategists. He and his colleagues will hopefully find a way to bring the war to a close. It’s why he must go, and he must go because our lives in 1917 are so entwined with the war, everyone must do something. I organised homes for refugees and you took them in. You and those who work with you look after the young men who return injured from the front, to help them recover enough to be sent back to fight for their country. We’re all involved.’

Carrie nodded and looked down at her hands. ‘But...he might...’

‘Yes, Carrie, he might be killed. Or he might be terribly injured, or suffer like your beloved David because of the horrors he has experienced and not know the world in which he now lives.’ She glanced at Carrie. ‘Have you seen him again?’

‘Yes.’ Carrie’s voice was little more than a whisper.

‘When?’

‘Christmas night. The snow had gone which made Nightingale Lane darker than before, but I saw someone standing in the shadows of the house opposite. I ran outside to him, Dorothy.’

Dorothy gasped. ‘Did you? What happened?’

Carrie shook her head. ‘Nothing. He’d gone. Vanished into thin air. Like a ghost.’

‘It’s a step forward though, isn’t it? He wants to make contact, Carrie. Perhaps he’s frightened of hurting you again.’

‘Maybe.’ She inhaled a breath deep into her lungs, thinking about what Dorothy had told her. ‘It all pales into insignificance when you hear about the men who have given their lives for their country. I’ll keep on hoping, Dorothy. It’s all I can do. It’s all any of us can do.’



‘YOU’VE GOT A VISITOR,’ said Ida coming out of the kitchen into the

hall as Carrie hung up her coat. 'And they haven't chosen the best of times.'

Carrie followed her into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of tea. She had chosen to walk home from Victoria Square and the cold had seeped into her bones and chilled them to the marrow. 'Who's the visitor, and what d'you mean they haven't chosen the best of times?'

'It's Master Stern. I've put him in your sitting room. The other thing is,' she took a breath, 'Tommy's been arrested.'

Carrie sat heavily on one of the wooden chairs around the kitchen table, her eyes wide with shock. 'What? Why?'

'Len West.' Ida sat too, clutching onto the skirt of her apron, her hands nervously crumpling the fabric into a ball. 'He told the police that Tommy threatened Arnold Bateman. That they saw him in the pub down the road in a lock-in after hours on Christmas Eve. They had words, Tommy and Bateman, and apparently Tommy lost his temper. Did Tommy tell you about it?'

'No.'

'Well, the police said it's what Len West told them.'

'And they believed him? Len West? Of all people?'

Ida nodded. 'He told the police Tommy warned Arnold if he ever went near you and John again he'd kill him.'

'I don't believe it.'

'Neither do I.'

'What can we do?'

'In my experience, Carrie, nothing. We wait. They might let him go because they've got no evidence other than the word of Len West, and we know that won't amount to much.' She rose from the chair and smoothed down the front of her apron. 'Don't forget Master Stern is in your sitting room.'

'Where's Pearl?'

'In her room.'

'Should I go to her?'

'See what Master Stern wants first. I'm sorry, Carrie, but he was here when Tommy was arrested.'

Carrie's mouth fell open and her shoulders slumped. 'You're joking.'

'Fraid not, duckie.'



JOHAN STOOD AS CARRIE joined him in the sitting room.

'Carrie. My dear.' He held his hands out to her and she automatically grasped them, regretting it when she felt the warmth of his hands in hers.

‘Johan. I think your visit here has been rather interesting. I can only apologise.’ She sat on the small sofa by the window and he sat opposite her, his eyes full of sympathy.

‘I came to offer my condolences for the loss of your husband. I hope my visit is not misplaced. If it is inconvenient I will come another time.’

‘No, Johan, of course not. I appreciate your visit, however as you’ve probably worked out my husband’s death was less than straightforward.’

‘So I’ve been led to understand. But your brother,’ he frowned, ‘he would not do such a thing.’

‘No, it’s unthinkable. Of course it’s no secret that Arnold was a difficult man and that he and I were not together, but no... His death was caused by another but by no one in this household.’

‘My visit before, when your husband and I...I came to tell you that Caleb had unfortunately passed away.’

Carrie’s hands flew to her mouth and her eyes filled with tears. ‘Oh, Johan. Johan I’m so sorry. Oh, my goodness, poor Lizabet. She must be beside herself.’

‘Yes, it has been a difficult time for her...for us...as a family. She has been lonely since she lived in London. Because of Caleb’s condition she did not make friends, we did not mix socially with other people. I have worried a great deal about her.’

‘Would you like me to visit? Does she...she...’

‘Know about when you and I were young? No, she does not know.’ Carrie nodded and sat back in the sofa, relief flooding her body. ‘I thought it would be better for her to be with her family in America at this time. She shut herself away and sank deep within herself. Caleb’s loss has been overwhelming for her. I wanted to go with her but business kept me here so my parents have travelled with her. She was happy to go to her mother and father and sister who will give her the comfort she needs. She will be away for some time, I think.’

‘And what about you? Was she away for Christmas?’

Johan smiled. ‘We do not celebrate Christmas, Carrie. We have our own festivities. Of course, when our family was living here,’ he lifted his hand, ‘we made sure we had some of the accoutrements of Christmas celebrations for my father’s business associates, many of whom were not of the Jewish faith.’

‘I see.’ She didn’t really see, but she remembered Conrad Stern being a man who knew how to flatter the right people when it suited him. ‘You must come for dinner one evening, Johan, when this silliness with my brother is cleared up. Mrs Coyle is still a wonderful cook.’

‘You’re lucky to have her, and of course, I accept.’ He placed his

hands on his knees and it was then that Carrie saw his beautifully manicured nails and hands that had never seen a day's manual work, which made the deep, blood ingrained scratch on his right hand even more visible.

'Johan, your hand. It looks very sore.'

He pulled his hand up and inspected the scratch. 'Our neighbour's dog. A lovely animal, but too affectionate. I tried to stop petting him and he objected and scratched me. I'll think twice before I fondle his ears again.'

'Would you like me to dress it for you?'

'Oh, thank you, no, no it's not necessary. Better in the air. It will heal faster.'



CARRIE KNOCKED ON THE door to Pearl and Tommy's sitting room. She was worried about the young woman who had had so much to face during the last few months and yet always believed that things would come right. She was certain the news of Tommy's arrest must have shaken her confidence to the core.

'Pearl?'

The door was opened by a white-face Pearl whose eyes looked enormous in her pale face. 'Come in, Carrie. You're a welcome sight I can tell you.'

'I'm sorry I didn't come before. Johan...'

'I know, it's alright. He was here when the police came for Tommy. What are they thinking, Carrie? Tommy could no more kill a man than fly in the air.'

'Did Dad go with him?'

'Arthur went down to the station afterwards. They wouldn't let anyone go with Tommy, not even me.'

They sat on the sofa in front of the fire and Carrie wrapped her arms around Pearl.

'What did they say?'

'This has all happened because of Len West. He told them Tommy threatened Arnold and it seems they believed him.'

'But it's rubbish, isn't it?'

Pearl stared at her. 'Of course it is? Do you doubt it?'

'No, but Tommy did go out after we'd all gone to bed. Did you know?'

Pearl shook her head. 'I must have been asleep. It was the first day I'd actually felt anything like back to normal and it took it out of me.'

'He told Elsie and me he was going to the pub down the road because they were opening after hours and he needed cigarettes. The

Lamb, it's called.'

'That's not where Arnold's body was found though is it?'

'The Olde Angel on Whitechapel Road.'

'But that's quite a walk away, so why do they think Tommy had anything to do with it?'

'Probably because he fell out with Len West on Christmas Eve, and when they questioned him about Arnold. Len saw a way to get his own back. You know what kind of man he is, the lowest of the low. As long as he's in the clear he wouldn't care who else he implicated, innocent or not, I'm sure it's of no concern to him.'

'I hope Tommy's alright. We were hoping to bring Eliza home in the New Year. How can that happen if he's in prison?'

Carrie hugged her. 'He's not in prison, Pearl. They're questioning him, and once they've questioned everyone else who was at the pub they'll see he's innocent. They've got a lot to prove and they'll have trouble with that seeing as he didn't have anything to do with it. My money's on Len West. He must be a suspect. The police know what he gets up to. He'd throw his own grandmother under a cart if he thought it would get him off the hook.'

'Do you think they'll let me visit him while he's at the police station?'

Carrie shrugged. 'I don't know. We'll ask Dad when he comes back. He'll be able to tell us more.' She rested her cheek on the top of Pearl's head. 'Please don't worry, Pearl. Tommy's innocent and they'll soon realise it. It'll all be alright.'

'Is this another of your Pollyanna moments?'

'I believe in Tommy, and so do you. It's all that matters.'



ARTHUR RETURNED TO the house later that evening, his face lined with worry. He sat in the kitchen resting his elbows on the table, and put his head in his hands.

'I can't believe this is happening. Even stone cold dead that bloody man is causing us trouble. Oh, Florrie, Florrie, why did you have any truck with him? I knew he was trouble the minute I laid eyes on him but she wouldn't listen. All she could see were the pound notes he put on the table.'

Carrie sat at the table with him, Pearl the other side, both waiting to see what was happening to Tommy. 'What have they said, Dad?'

'They suspect him of killing Arnold Bateman. It's all they would say. Len West is there as well.'

Pearl's eyes widened. 'So it's not just Tommy they're questioning? Did you see him, Arthur? Tommy I mean.'

Arthur shook his head. 'Wouldn't let me see him. In the end I got so exhausted I just left. I sat in the waiting room all them hours with not even a cup of tea. I felt like they suspected me too. They just ignored me. The sergeant at the desk kept looking at me and shaking his head as if to let me know there was no point me being there. And there wasn't. They were never going to let me speak to him.'

Ida pushed a huge mug of tea across the table towards Arthur, along with a plate on which there were two rounds of bacon sandwiches.

'Get that down you, Arthur. You look like you need it.'

'Thanks, Ida,' he nodded. 'You're right, I'm starving.'

Ida sat at the table with the others. 'All you can do now is wait. Like I said to Carrie there's nothing you can do. It's a waiting game. They'll be playing cat and mouse with Tommy. It's what they do. They'll try and trick him, trip him up so he says things to incriminate himself, so you better hope he's innocent and that he had nothing to do with Arnold Bateman copping for it, because if he isn't innocent and he did have something to do with it, anything, they'll know.'

'Ida!' Carrie cried. 'Course he's innocent. He had nothing to do with it.'

Ida pulled a face. 'We all want to believe that. None of us want to think our loved ones are capable of doing wrong, but you have to face things. Arnold Bateman was causing you problems and Tommy had threatened him at the door.' She shook her head. 'It won't go down well, and you should be prepared for the worst. I'm just playing devil's advocate, ducky. My advice is...think about it and be prepared.'

Arthur nodded as he chewed. 'Ida's right, girls. It could happen and we should be prepared for an outcome we don't want.'

Carrie sat up straight, her expression determined. 'If it ever comes to that we'll get a good solicitor and barrister. Johan Stern will know someone I'm sure of it. I've got some savings. It'll be worth every penny.'

Tears ran down Pearl's face as she got up from the table and pushed the chair purposefully underneath.

'He didn't do anything wrong. That's the thing. My Tommy would never take someone else's life no matter what he thought of them. I'll never believe any different, whatever happens. Eliza and I will always believe in him. They could be putting his head through the noose and I would still believe in him. He's never let me down, never given up on me even when everyone thought I was going to die. I'll never ever give up on him.'



Chapter 65



CARRIE PULLED ON HER gloves and turned to the large mirror in the hall to adjust her hat. She replaced the diamante topped pins to secure the hat into her chignon and as she lowered her arms she stared at her reflection. Her eyes were drawn to the eyes in the mirror, the ones that had seen so much, that had cried tears of laughter, and of sorrow. What a story those eyes could tell if they could speak, the story of a young woman who had changed her life from one of fear for the future and a journey into the unknown, to one where she had borne a beautiful child, had known the most intimate love and the deepest sorrow, had worked as hard as her body would allow and used her intelligence to ensure a safe future for her son. She was no longer a girl. The girl had gone forever, those years had dissolved away like a cloud of vapour without her even noticing, and in her place was a woman of means, a mother, daughter, sister, and friend. And now a widow.

Her clothes reflected her new status, for status is what it was in the world in which she lived. It was expected that she would go into a period of mourning for Arnold Bateman, for after all, he had been her husband. She had married him in a church of Christ, and in His eyes and in the eyes of the law, regardless of the limitations of their relationship, they were man and wife. She had taken vows on that fateful day, the day she had worn a pale green silk dress and carried peonies, and said goodbye to her girlhood, to her best friend, Pearl, and to the life she had known. She had vowed in a voice so quiet it could barely be heard, to love, honour and obey the man she would call her husband. She had not loved Arnold Bateman for she didn't know him, had never honoured him and would never do so because he was dishonourable, and had been forced, with violence, to obey him so he could further his career. His thoughts for her and her welfare had not existed; he had never once shown her a kindness. Even less for her son.

She sighed and thought of Tommy. She knew her brother. He was a quiet, gentle man, someone who had never been in trouble in his

life. When his friends had stolen and cheated, or had caroused in the public houses after dark and flirted with the girls on the street who offered men the route to paradise for a shilling, Tommy had chosen not to be with them. He had always been shy and had suffered because of it. She closed her eyes and bent her head. Tears threatened yet again. The thought of him being incarcerated in a police cell, caged like an animal, with no prospect of release overwhelmed her with the most all-consuming sadness. Their Tommy, her little brother. She could only imagine how frightened he was.

‘Carrie?’ Ida came into the hall, a pile of freshly laundered towels in her arms. ‘I thought you’d gone, ducky.’

Carrie smiled and nodded and pulled the black net veil over her face. ‘Yes, I’m just about to go.’

‘Do you think he’s still there?’

Shrugging she picked up her dolly-bag from the dresser. ‘Something tells me he isn’t, but I don’t have any clue where he might be staying if he’s not still at the Alexandria. I would have expected him to stay with Dorothy and Marcus, but.’ She sighed. ‘I know he hasn’t gone there.’

‘Family?’

‘Maybe.’ She shook her head in frustration. ‘When we were in Secunderabad we were so besotted with one another we didn’t get as far as discussing his family. I wish we had. It might be the answer to all of this. If he has left the Alexandria and I knew where he was I could go and see him. He might not like it but it would be more difficult to turn me away if he’s staying in someone’s house.’

Ida observed Carrie like a mother watches her own child. ‘Are you alright, love? I’m worried about you. You have so much on your plate.’

Carrie momentarily closed her eyes and blinked away the threatened tears. ‘All of this will pass, won’t it? It won’t last forever. Nothing lasts forever. Soon we’ll know about Tommy which is uppermost in my mind right now. And Pearl.’

‘Is she still in her room?’ Carrie nodded. ‘P’raps it’s best to let her work things out her own way.’

‘Yes, Ida, you’re right. We all have to. No one can tell us how to feel and we all cope with things in a different way, but we have each other. We all have each other and we’ll get through it whatever happens.’

Carrie stood at the entrance of The Alexandria Nursing Home. The building looked more like a palatial bungalow belonging to one of the snooty matrons at the top of the social tree in Secunderabad than a nursing home, but she knew as soon as she went through the half-glazed double doors, the rustling efficiency of the nurses and a smell

she couldn't describe, rather like a mixture of flowers and disinfectant, would remind her of why she was there.

The gardens were still beautiful, not many flowers with it being the last week in December, but someone had cleverly and thoughtfully planted grasses and shrubs that gave the patients a pleasant vista to look out on when the weather was inclement, and somewhere for them to explore if they were of a mind when weather permitted. She wondered if David had ever wandered the paths around the flower beds, appreciating the tranquillity of the place. And it was tranquil.

She began the walk down the drive towards the entrance, her stomach churning with apprehension. She wasn't sure what she was hoping for. If David was still there it would mean that any progress he had made was limited, but at least she would know where he was. If he had been discharged then it would signal that he was better, but she doubted the staff would be willing to tell her where he was staying. In either case he had made a choice. He wasn't ready to see her.

'My name is Carrie Bateman. I've come to discover if David Lawrence is still a patient here.'

The young nurse eyed her with some confusion, clearly recognising her from a previous visit yet her veil obscured her features and Carrie was glad of it. Carrie remembered her as the nurse who took her note to David, and wondered if it was her voice the nurse recognised but was unable to reconcile her with her mourning dress.

'Captain Lawrence?' asked the nurse. Carrie nodded. 'Why, he left some weeks ago.'

'Oh, I didn't realise...'

'He'd made such good progress you see,' said the nurse, cutting Carrie off. 'He'd asked to be discharged at the earliest opportunity and of course the doctors were pleased for him to go back into normal life as soon as possible.'

'Normal life?'

The nurse nodded. 'He returned home...to his wife. It was quite the reunion.'

'His wife? There must be some mistake. Captain Lawrence isn't married.'

The nurse pulled a large leather-bound book from a shelf behind her and began to swiftly turn the pages with a licked finger.

'Yes, here we are...Captain David Lawrence. Discharge date the fifth of December. Discharged to Mrs Sadie Lawrence of Henrietta Street, Covent Garden.'

Carrie's world stopped turning. Time seemed to come to an abrupt halt. David had a wife, had been married when he was in Secunderabad yet not once did he allude to any life other than the one

he seemed to have, that of a single man.

‘Are you sure?’ she said to the nurse, who had cheerfully replaced the book on the shelf.

‘Oh, yes. I was on duty you see. We all came into the foyer to wish them good health and happiness and to wave them goodbye. The doctors were so pleased. David Lawrence is one of our successes.’



CARRIE STOOD AT THE railings, looking into the grounds she knew she would never see again. She had wished fervently that David would become well enough to be discharged and she had finally got her wish. He had left the Alexandria, returned to the life he'd had before being posted to Secunderabad, the one in which he had concealed a wife and a home, in Henrietta Street in Covent Garden no less.

‘You never said,’ she whispered. ‘You never told me. Why? Why didn't you tell me, David. You knew about me, knew my situation with Arnold, was aware he wasn't John's father. I was open and honest with you, totally and utterly honest yet you felt it was unnecessary to be the same with me. No wonder you stopped me from visiting. You didn't want me to bump into your wife.’ As she made her way to the tram stop, the misery of rejection sitting on her shoulders, she wondered if there were children.



SHE LAY ON HER BED in the darkness, trying not to think of him, the moments they'd shared when they were together in India, the promise of a future together, one that had been taken away so abruptly when David had been sent to France. She remembered how she had feared for him, how she'd prayed every day that somehow he would be brought back to her, that they would be together again. She wondered if in some way it had been her fault...had she been so overwhelmed with her love for him that she had missed that moment when he had told her he was married? Did he tell her? In every thought of him, in every image in her mind's eye of him she had never thought of him with someone else, had never considered that someone could have been waiting for him in England. Someone other than her.

She lay on her side and stared into the gloom of her bedroom. Suddenly she didn't know what to hope for anymore. She realised that waiting for David had almost become an occupation in itself, that behind everything that had happened there had always been the thought that David would be thinking of her as much as she was thinking about him. His appearances in Nightingale Lane had given

her such hope she had begun to picture them together again, at the house, with John, even perhaps getting married one day.

When Florrie had died Carrie knew she hadn't grieved like a daughter who had lost her mother. Because of their history and because of the decisions Florrie had made concerning Carrie's future her grief did not have the depth of feeling it would have had, had they been closer. Arnold's death had been a shock to her, but Tommy had been right when he suggested there must have been a part of her that was relieved he could no longer plague her with his hatred and violence. She did not regret his passing. She had gradually begun to feel a sense of freedom, a releasing of the shackles that had bound her to him.

What she felt at the discovery of David's deceit was grief at its most raw and ragged. She would never find the words to define how much he had hurt her. She had upheld him as an honourable man, had made her love for him an open book for her family and friends. They had listened to her glowing portrayal of him and never once questioned his love for her, had supported her when it became impossible for her to nurse him back to health. She had felt an uncomfortable powerful guilt at supporting his admittance to the Alexandria and had lived with that guilt every day, yet behind all of this was a secret, one that he had done everything in his power to keep from her, even taking steps to prevent her and the friends they shared from visiting him at the Alexandria. She sat up suddenly. Dorothy and Marcus. Did they know? Had they any idea that David was married?

She slid off the bed, grabbed her dolly-bag and ran downstairs. In the hall she threw on her coat, fastened her hat and veil and left the house, slamming the front door behind her. Ida and Pearl ran into the hall at the sound of the door closing and looked at each other in astonishment.

'What's that about?' said Ida. 'She never came to see me after she'd been to the Alexandria and I didn't want to pry.'

'She went upstairs, didn't she? I heard her, heard the door go, heard her fling her keys on the dresser and the sound of the squeaky step as she went up. It was like she was wading through treacle, as though she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.'

'Something's happened.'

'You don't think it's got anything to do with Tommy, do you?'

Ida shook her head. 'She would have said, and you would have been the first to know. No, it's something else. She went to the Alexandria to try and find out where Captain Lawrence is.'

'Maybe she did and it wasn't what she wanted to hear.'

Ida sighed. 'Maybe.'



CARRIE RAN DOWN NIGHTINGALE Lane, her coat unbuttoned and flying behind her as she ran. She held her hat to her head, then tried to secure it as she made her way down the street. She pulled her veil down over her face and thought it was the only thing she would ever thank Arnold Bateman for; the veil hid the paleness of her skin and the puffy redness surrounding her eyes where she had cried into her pillow to muffle the sound of her tears. Pearl had put John to bed before Carrie had returned from the Alexandria and the last thing she wanted was for her son to see her distress. She hadn't wanted anyone to see her sorrow because she knew it would provoke questions that she didn't have the strength to answer.

She waited at the tram stop for ten minutes than walked quickly to the next one, thinking that by the time it arrived at the stops it was likely she would get to Victoria Square quicker by running and walking. By the time she had reached the third stop the tram had caught up with her progress and she gratefully bought a ticket and sat at the front, her breath coming in short bursts. She looked down at herself and fastened her coat, aware that some of the other travellers were looking at her strangely, a widow with her coat undone in the winter weather was unthinkable, pulling the veil lower down her face so none of it could be seen.

She stared out of the front window as the tram rumbled around the streets, down Great Marlborough Street and Grosvenor Street and around the palatial squares where the war had not seemed to penetrate, yet by virtue of numbers must have been touched by the huge losses the country had experienced. Christmas trees still shone in the windows of the salons of people whose lives could well have been blighted by sorrow, their future changed forever, yet were determined to prove their strength and belief in their sons would never be diminished.

Carrie felt chastened and her breathing slowed, knowing her reaction to the news of David's wife had been because of shock, that nothing had prepared her for the realisation that David was the same as everyone else, that he had the same weaknesses as other people. She had never thought this of him, had placed him on a pedestal that had possibly been too high for anyone to achieve and maintain. She considered that she may have expected too much, and perhaps she had, but one of the lessons she had tried to teach her son was that lying was unacceptable. And David had lied to her, by omission it was true, but it was still a lie.

She got off the tram at the stop just before Victoria Square and

walked the few hundred yards to Dorothy and Marcus' home where she stood outside for a moment looking up at the windows. She hoped with all her heart that Marcus wasn't home. She needed to be herself, to cry if needs be, and she knew she would never feel comfortable doing so with Marcus present. She stepped up to the double doors and knocked.

A maid answered almost immediately, and without asking who she was and what her business was with the family immediately showed her to Dorothy's sitting room where she was alone, the twins on a rug at her feet. She looked up as Carrie went into the room.

'Darling! I saw you from the window. Carrie, you never come here at this time. Has something happened? I heard that Tommy had been arrested for Arnold Bateman's murder. Has he been charged?' Carrie removed her veil and shook her head. Dorothy frowned and went to her, hugging her close, then encouraged her to sit. 'What's happened, Carrie. I'm sorry to say it but you look awful. Wait a moment. We need something to bolster us.' She rang the bell for a maid and asked for food; light snacks, and hot wine. 'Right. Now tell me. Something has happened.'

'I went to the Alexandria today.'

Dorothy grasped both Carrie's hands in hers. 'Yes, was he there?'

'No. He was discharged at the beginning of December. Dorothy, I must ask you because I have no one else to ask. Did you know David was married?'

Dorothy frowned. 'What? No, no he isn't, is he?'

'Do you not know?'

Dorothy sat back in her chair, looking bewildered. 'But Marcus would have told me.'

'If he knew. David didn't tell me, at least he didn't not tell me, he omitted it from his story. Not once, even when I told him about Johan and my arranged marriage to Arnold did he ever mention he had a wife.'

'How did you find out?'

'The new nurse at the Alexandria. I don't think she knew she wasn't meant to discuss David with anyone. She was the one who took my note to him. Whether he read it or not I have no idea, but she said the day he was discharged she was there, on duty. That they all congregated in the foyer to wave him goodbye when his wife, Mrs Sadie Lawrence took him home.'

Dorothy's expression changed from one of astonishment to sympathy. She shook her head and looked down at her hands.

'It's all my fault.'

Carrie stared at her. 'What d'you mean?'

'I introduced you to him, didn't I, facilitated your first meeting

with him when I came home to London from India because I thought he would look out for you, take care of you. It's my fault. I'm so sorry, Carrie.'

'No, Dorothy, no, it's not your fault. I fell in love with him. I fell in love with the man I thought he was, a truthful man who I thought would never deceive me. After living with Arnold he was a breath of fresh air, he was so kind and thoughtful.'

'But he *was* all of those things to you wasn't he? He still is a lovely man, and underneath everything he had become after being involved in the fighting which would change anyone, I believe he's still a lovely man. He loves you, Carrie, I know he does. Surely, if he had no feelings for you he wouldn't stand outside your house in the freezing cold waiting for a glimpse of you. There must be a reason why he does it.'

Carrie shook her head. 'Does it matter why? We can never be together, not in the way I'd hoped. He already has a wife, and I better than anyone know how difficult it can be to end a marriage, even if both parties really want to, and I don't know if he would really want to. She went to him and took him back to their home to care for him. I can't overcome that.'

'Do you know where it is, his home I mean.'

'Henrietta Street.'

'Gosh. Really? I'm surprised.'

'Why?'

Dorothy raised her eyebrows in surprise. 'You don't know it? It's...shall we say...a place you would live in had you made connections in your life, an area to which one would aspire. The houses are huge, palatial one could say. Beautiful. I know David came from a good family, his father is a doctor, a professor I believe. His mother was a society girl, Lady something or other, but Henrietta Street?' She frowned. 'They must be wealthier than I thought.'

Carrie leant forward smiling, reaching for the twins' tiny hands, and holding them in her own. 'They're gorgeous, Dorothy. I'm so happy for you, and for Marcus.' Dorothy's face softened as her eyes went to her babies. 'But...it doesn't matter now. I can't fight a wife can I? And I don't want to. Marriage is untouchable. I wouldn't want to be the cause of anyone's unhappiness.'

She stood to go and Dorothy walked her to the door of the sitting room.

'I...don't know what to say. I didn't know, I promise you.'

Carrie kissed her cheek and smiled. 'I know, I know you didn't. I have so much to be grateful for, Dorothy, and Tommy needs me right now. If his situation gets worse I'll need to find someone to defend him. He'll never cope alone, he's not made like that.'

‘If there’s anything I or Marcus can do, please, Carrie, don’t hesitate to ask.’



CARRIE WALKED HOME from Dorothy’s with a heavy heart. She had learnt nothing about David as it seemed he had kept his marriage a secret from Dorothy and Marcus which Carrie found strange. ‘Why would you keep something as important as that a secret from one of your closest friends?’ she said under her breath as she hailed a Hansom cab.

‘Henrietta Street, please,’ she said to the driver. She sat back into the darkness of the cab, wanting to think without distraction, needing to weigh up everything David had said to her about his life when they were in Secunderabad. Nothing he had ever said to her had made her think he was married. She did not expect him to be a man without experience. He was in his thirties, of course he would have had relationships, it was something she hadn’t questioned, but a wife? It felt as though she was thinking about someone who was a stranger to her, someone she thought she knew, but didn’t.

‘Henrietta Street, Madam,’ the Hansom cab driver called down. ‘Which number was you wanting?’

‘No, no number, please continue down the street, as slowly as you can.’

‘Madam?’

‘Don’t worry, I have the means to pay the fare, extra if you do it without question.’

‘As you wish, Madam.’

The cab took Carrie the length of Henrietta Street and when they got to the end Carrie asked the driver to turn the cab about and go back the other way. The driver shrugged but did as he was asked. As they went Carrie observed the polished white stone of the palatial facades, the unblemished paintwork of the front entrances and wrought iron railings, the long windows dressed with ruched curtains from which muted light glowed with a velvet luminosity into the darkness of the evening. The street had a stately superiority, an imposing air that had to be seen to be understood. Dorothy’s description of Henrietta Street had not done it the justice it deserved.

‘Where to now, Madam?’

‘Nightingale Lane please, driver. Number ninety-nine.’

The warmth hit her as she went into the hall. She felt the blood returning to the tips of her fingers and toes and it was so welcome she almost wept. She hung her coat on the coat-stand, then removed her hat and veil, throwing her keys onto the dresser. Before she had time

to go upstairs the door to Pearl's sitting room opened and Pearl stood on the threshold.

'Carrie?'

'Any news about Tommy?' Carrie asked her.

'Nothing. Arthur went to the police station again today, but they wouldn't allow him to see him, not while there's an on-going investigation they said.' Carrie looked up at the ceiling and sighed. 'What's happened, Carrie? Something has. Ida and I are worried about you.'

'Please don't. You have enough to think about, and whatever it is will keep. We need to decide what to do about Tommy. If this goes on for too long he's going to need help.'

'You mean a solicitor?'

'Yes. I'll ask Johan Stern if he knows anyone. I haven't a clue where to start.'

'Neither do I. I feel useless to be honest. I don't know how to help him.'

'I think I might have to call in a few favours. We can't let Tommy take the blame for something he hasn't done.'

'You do believe that don't you, that he had nothing to do with it.'

Carrie went to Pearl and enveloped her in her arms. 'Of course I believe it. He wouldn't hurt a fly. The problem is if it's a choice between Tommy and Len West, well, Len West knows how it all works, knows how to play the police and say and do the right things. I'd bet my last penny he has a few in his pocket, especially if they make use of his...services. We don't know how it all works, so we must learn. And fast. Look how many times the police have let Len go because they didn't have anything on him. He's got friends in the right places which is why he carries on doing what he does.'

'Tommy reckons half the men who go to Buck's Row are in the police force or the judiciary.'

Carrie nodded. 'He's likely right. Not much help to us, but it might not have been West who killed Arnold. It could have been anyone, p'raps someone who took umbrage at Arnold's advances to them. P'raps he picked on the wrong one this time, someone who was prepared to fight back.'



IN JOHN'S BEDROOM CARRIE gently lowered herself on the edge of his bed and watched him as he slept. She leant forward and kissed his hair. Pearl had obviously bathed him when she was out; he smelt of soap and talcum powder. His eyelids fluttered a little and she leant back, not wanting to wake him but needing to be close to him, the one

constant in her life, the little boy who brought her so much joy and pride. Her eyes glazed with tears which she rubbed away. This wasn't the time for regrets over David or what her and John's future would hold. If Tommy hadn't returned to them by New Year's Day Carrie knew it meant he was in trouble and they would need to act. To act too soon might point towards his guilt, as if they were trying to preempt a charge, but if they were too late she knew he would flounder.

She rose from the bed, gently smoothing the covers around John's body, then went to the window. It had become a force of habit for her to do so, to go to the window either in John's bedroom or her own, and move one of the curtains aside slightly, just enough for her to see the houses opposite, the muted glow from the windows through the curtains, or a movement in the shadows cast by the glow out into the night.

She frowned and concentrated her focus on the doorway of the opposite house as her eyes became familiar with the intense darkness. There was someone there, standing silently across the road, watching the house as he had before. Without seeing him she knew it was David, sensed his presence, his close proximity to her. Exhilaration went through her, then utter anger. He didn't know she knew about his wife and he thought it was acceptable to make her believe he still wanted her, to make her think there could be a future for them. She grabbed hold of both curtains and yanked them apart, then stood in the window in full view of the street where it would have been impossible for him not to see her. David stepped out of the darkness into the middle of the street and looked up at her. She returned the look without smiling, raising her chin slightly in defiance, then drew the curtains together again.

'Enough games, David,' she whispered. 'It's over.'



SHE HEARD THE KNOCKER being dropped against the front door with a loud clang. She glanced at John concerned that it had woken him, but he slept soundly. Downstairs she could hear Ida's voice, her tones punctuated by an exclamation mark. Was it Tommy? She prayed it was. She hurried across the landing and went down the stairs. Ida was in the hall, her face drawn into a wide smile. And so was David.

'Carrie, look. It's Captain Lawrence.'

Carrie nodded and crossed her arms in front of her. 'So I see.' She pressed her lips together and averted her gaze.

'Well,' said Ida, rubbing her hands together with embarrassment, aware of an awkwardness between them. 'I've got things to do. I'll leave you to it,' she said as she bustled out of the hall and into the

kitchen, closing the door behind her.

'Can we talk?' David asked her. 'I should have come before, but I wasn't sure... I didn't know if you felt the same.'

She took a deep breath, wondering how she should break the news to him that she knew about his wife. She knew she loved him, her churning stomach and desire for him told her that, but she felt a need to hurt him, to hurt him as much as she was hurting.

'How's Sadie?'

'Who?'

'Come now, David. You can't have forgotten about her again. Sadie? Your wife?' David's mouth formed a straight line, but in his eyes was amusement which angered Carrie even further. She lowered her arms and leant forward, her chin jutting towards him in anger, her eyes dark with hurt. 'You think it's funny that you deceived me? You think it's amusing that I discovered your deceit from someone else? You never mentioned her when we were in Secunderabad, or did you get married whilst you were in the Alexandria?'

'Sadie's not my wife,' he said quietly.

Carrie faltered. 'What?' She chuckled. 'There you go again. I suppose you think the scullery maid's stupid and can't work things out for herself. The nurse at the hospital said you were discharged to your wife, the one who lives in Henrietta Street.'

'Sadie's not my wife, she's my sister-in-law.'

Carrie stepped back and put a hand to her cheek. She said it was his wife, she thought. She definitely said it was his wife who had met him at the nursing home. 'The nurse...'

David nodded, nervously turning his cap around and around in his fingers. 'We had to say Sadie was my wife, otherwise they wouldn't have discharged me. They were on the brink of a decision and wouldn't agree to release me unless I had a family member to take care of me, preferably a spouse. I desperately wanted to leave because...well, I know you said you would wait but...well, I read your letter and I wanted...I needed you, Carrie. That place, it's lonely and I wanted so much to see you, particularly after I got your letter. I made a real effort, did everything they asked me to do, therapy, long walks, fresh air, I even tried painting which I was hopeless at, but I did whatever I had to do to get out of there. Don't get me wrong, they were wonderful, they helped me to get back to who I was, you know, before, but I needed to leave.'

'And your brother agreed to it?'

'My brother's dead, Carrie, killed on the Somme. Sadie is his wife, Mrs Sadie Lawrence.'

Carrie put her face into her hands and began to sob, guilt running through her. I should have known, she thought. I know him. I know

him so well. I should have known he would never... 'I'm a terrible person,' she cried. 'Oh, David, I'm sorry, so sorry about your brother. And so sorry to have doubted you. Why would you still love me? I thought the very worst of you, thought you'd lied to me, thought you'd deceived me.'

David flung his cap onto the hall dresser and wrapped her in his arms, kissing her hair, her eyes and then her lips. She clung to him as though she would never let him go, loving his voice and the smell of him, which was all David, the man she remembered, the one she'd fallen for. 'You weren't to know,' he whispered. 'Staff at the Alexandria were given instructions not to give anyone information about me or my whereabouts. Clearly, the young nurse didn't receive those instructions or completely ignored them. She's a sweet girl, but her head's not on her tasks sometimes. I'm so sorry, Carrie. There is no way I would have wanted you to be hurt. You must have hated me.'

'I didn't hate you, David, but I won't pretend, I was hurt, devastated really. It was something I had never questioned, never thought about. I even went to see Dorothy to ask her if she knew if you were married. Of course, she said she had no idea.'

He chuckled. 'I'm surprised. If I know Dorothy she has plenty to say about most things. I bet she questioned Marcus about it.'

Carrie laughed through her tears. 'I don't think there's any doubt about that.' They looked at one another, wondering how they could have ever got to this point. 'Are you staying for a while?' she asked him quietly.

He smiled. 'Could I? I expect you have questions.'

'A few.'

She led him into the front living room and shut the door. At the sound of the click of the door, Pearl came out of her room and Ida cracked open the door to the kitchen.

'Did you hear that?' whispered Ida, grinning. 'Who'd have thought it.'

Pearl nodded. 'I think it's alright though,' she whispered back. 'They've gone in there.' She nodded towards the front living room, smiling. 'He sounds alright, better, more like she told us about him.'

'Thank goodness something's going right for once. She hasn't been herself all day, barely spoken. And then she went out again, this evening, in a right flurry she was, and I know she thought no one had seen her. That's nothing like our Carrie. I knew there was something. That girl is like a daughter to me. I know her as well as I know Francis. A woman should always trust her gut instinct.'



‘WHY DIDN’T YOU CONTACT me before, David? I thought that was it between us, you were so angry with me for taking you to the Alexandria.’ They were sitting together, his hands holding hers, their eyes softly observing each other as they spoke.

David had the grace to look sheepish. ‘Yes, about that. I owe you an apology. I was awful to you, and what you did...it was the best thing. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I hadn’t been admitted. They put me back on track. I didn’t much like their methods—at first it made me feel like less of a man—but whatever they did it worked. The doctors were marvellous.’

‘I’m glad, so glad it worked for you. And what about your sister-in-law? How did she get to know about you?’

David’s face changed, a look of regret passing across his features. ‘She didn’t at first, because as you discovered to your cost I wanted to be left alone, but when I knew the only way to be discharged was to go to a family member, ideally a spouse, I knew she was the person I needed to contact. I got a message to her, a telegram which she answered immediately. Sadie’s a good sort. My brother was lucky when he found her,’ he winced, ‘but not so lucky later on. She misses him terribly, says he was the love of her life and that there’ll be no other.’

‘Are there children?’

‘Yes, two. Boys. Both need their father but...she’ll manage alone. She will manage because she’s a strong woman.’

‘He was older than you?’

‘Yes, by five years, a lieutenant colonel. Peter. A clever chap. I looked up to him.’

‘Do you mind me asking you something?’

He smiled, a frown knotting his eyebrows. ‘Of course not. You can ask me anything.’

‘Henrietta Street?’

He smiled. ‘The house belongs to Sadie’s family. It’s nothing to do with mine, we don’t have that kind of money. When Peter was killed they offered her the house for as long as she wanted it, so when I left the Alexandria it was where I stayed.’ He leant into her. ‘I think the address helped,’ he joked. ‘No one argues with someone who lives in Henrietta Street. And to be honest Sadie wouldn’t brook any argument from them. She can be quite stern as I discovered.’

‘Really? In what way?’

‘The doctor gave her a list of things I must do to maintain my mood. She’s enforcing them.’

Carrie laughed. ‘Oh, dear. Good for her.’

A quiet descended upon them but there was no embarrassment. Sitting together in the quiet felt natural and comfortable, an easy

silence.

‘I suppose I should get back.’

Carrie smiled and nodded. ‘I s’pose so. We don’t want Sadie hammering the door down.’

‘She knows about you.’

‘Oh.’

‘And utterly approves. Thinks what you’re doing for our lads is marvellous.’

‘Oh, well, that’s nice.’

He got up and reached for his coat.

‘Before I go...I heard something, about your brother.’

Carrie sighed, the anxiety over Tommy she’d managed to forget for a while hurtling her back to her fear for him. ‘What did you hear?’

‘That he’d been arrested for Arnold Bateman’s murder.’

‘Yes, he was.’

‘I would console you for your loss, and of course the loss of a man’s life is a terrible thing as I know from experience, but it must have brought you some relief I should think. He wasn’t kind to you.’

‘I’m ashamed to say it has.’

‘I don’t think you should be ashamed, Carrie. He plagued your life.’ She lowered her face and bit her lip. ‘Is Tommy still under arrest?’

‘He’s being held at the station in Brick Lane.’

‘Well then, that’s another reason I’m glad I came to see you, apart from the obvious of course. Tommy couldn’t have murdered Bateman on Christmas Eve.’

She looked at him in astonishment. ‘Why ever not?’

‘Because he was with me. We’d met on Nightingale Lane. I’d been waiting for you to open the curtains a little, like you had before, but you didn’t, and I was about to leave when Tommy came out of the house. He immediately came over to me and shook my hand and suggested we went for a drink which we did. I took him to my brother’s club where they were holding a sort of Christmas Eve memorial drink to him which I’d intended to attend alone, but when I met Tommy I thought he might like to join me which he did. Your brother’s a quiet chap but good company. Thinks very highly of you. We seemed to talk about you for most of the night. To be honest he’s the reason I found the courage to knock on your door. I don’t think I would have otherwise.’

‘So he didn’t go to The Lamb then?’ she gasped. ‘Len West said he was in The Lamb and that he’d argued with Arnold and threatened him. It’s why the police arrested him. They said he was the most likely suspect.’

‘Couldn’t have done any of that. He spent the evening with me and afterwards we walked here together until I managed to get a cab to

Henrietta Street which was the devil of a job on Christmas Eve. One came along just as Tommy reached the front door. And it was an awful night, can't imagine him prowling the streets at that time of the morning.'

She flung her arms around him and kissed him over and over. 'David Lawrence, thank the good Lord for you, thank you so much. You have no idea what you've done.'

He chuckled. 'If that's the response I'm going to get I'll do it again right away.'

Carrie kissed David again then ran into the hall, her heart thumping in her chest with excitement. 'Pearl! Ida! Tommy's going to be alright. He's going to be alright.'



Chapter 66



DAVID ASSURED CARRIE he would go to the police station in Brick Lane and tell them what he'd told her. The atmosphere at number ninety-nine lifted immediately, with Ida bustling around the kitchen announcing she would make Tommy's favourite cake, the Granny Loaf which he loved to liberally spread with butter if he could get away with it without Ida seeing him and slapping his hand away from the butter dish, and Pearl finding her favourite dress and diamante topped hairpins so she could welcome him home looking well and happy for his arrival.

'I want to look nice for him,' she said. 'When do you think it will be?' she asked Carrie breathlessly. 'Will it be today, d'you think? Did David go right away? He won't leave it will he? He knows how important it is?'

Carrie chuckled. 'He went straight from here although I doubt Tommy'll be released tonight, Pearl. You know what the police are like, they'll want to check everything first. Even with David's station in life they won't believe him just because of it. They'll probably want to question people at the club David and Tommy went to on Christmas Eve to make sure that what David is telling them is the truth and they won't do it tonight. I think Tommy might have another night to spend in a cell before he can come home to us.'



THEY WAITED, THE FOLLOWING day and evening, and the day after that. Their positive feelings were replaced with those of doubt and anxiety. David returned to Carrie the next day and assured her he had seen the investigating officer who had promised he would look into his story and if it held up, Tommy would be released.

'So why isn't he back yet?' said Pearl, misery etching her pale features. 'I thought he would be home by now.'

Carrie sighed. 'Yes, so did I. New Year's Eve already. He's been at

the station for nearly a week. God knows how he must be feeling. He's not even had a change of clothes and what they've been giving him to eat is anyone's guess.'

'They'll have given him clothes,' Arthur said, quietly tucking into one of Ida's fruit scones laden with homemade jam. 'Old ones they keep for such occasions. Can't make a guess at the food though. I hope they remembered to feed him, you know what he's like about his food.'

'You're doing alright,' said Carrie, eyeing him as he took another bite out of the scone.

'I hate to say it, Carrie, because I don't want to speak ill of Florrie, but I've never eaten so well. Look at this.' He pulled aside his waistcoat to reveal his shirt almost bursting at the buttons. 'Not had a belly on me since I was a nipper. Ida's a wonderful cook,' he breathed. 'And I can't get enough of these,' he said as shovelled the last of the scone into his mouth.

'Tommy won't be the only one who needs a change of wardrobe if you keep eating like that, Dad. You're almost bursting out of that shirt.'

He looked at her with penitence. 'It's alright though isn't it?'

She smiled affectionately and kissed the top of his head. 'It's more than alright,' she said. 'And lovely to see. You've always been too skinny. About time you had a bit more flesh on you.'



THE DAY FELT TOO LONG. Carrie found herself looking at the clock every few minutes and sighing. There was still no word from Tommy and certainly no appearance of him.

'Maybe the police didn't believe your David,' said Ida as she wrapped up The Granny Cake and put it on a shelf in the pantry. 'Len West can tell a good tale. He's been doing it all his life.'

'But they have to believe the truth don't they,' said Pearl. 'David is telling the truth. Poor Tommy. What must it be like to be accused of something so awful and know you didn't do it, couldn't have done it because you were somewhere else. He must be going out of his mind with worry.'

That evening, Carrie, Pearl, Ida, Arthur, Alfie and David sat in the living room trying to feel positive about the dawning of 1918.

'Ten o'clock,' said Arthur, 'and in two hours we start another year. God help us if it's not an improvement on 1917. What a terrible year it's been.'

'The only good thing for us has been Eliza,' said Pearl quietly, waving away the offer of a drink from Carrie. 'And I'm hoping we'll

bring her home next month. We need it, Tommy and me. Need to get our little girl home to be with her mum and dad. She belongs here, not in some hospital room. I want to get to know her and for her to know me. She'll think her mum wears a nurses uniform if she stays there much longer.'

Carrie put a hand over Pearl's and looked into her eyes. 'Things will get better, Pearl.'

Pearl nodded, her mouth turned down. 'Couldn't get much worse, could they?'

They sat in front of the fire, nursing their glasses of sherry and ignoring the titbits Ida had put out for them all to nibble on while they waited for the turning of the year.

'Do you think the bells will ring?' asked Alfie. 'Are they allowed to?'

'They rang in November, didn't they,' answered Arthur. 'after the Battle of Cambrai. Now that was something to celebrate, but I doubt Big Ben will ring. Even the clockface lights have been turned off. Too much of a temptation for enemy aircraft. I miss it to be honest. Big Ben is a bit of a symbol for us isn't it? When it rings again we'll know we're alright.'

At half past eleven they were quieter than before, their spirits dampened, their hope all but gone.

'I might take that cake to the station tomorrow,' said Ida. 'They can let him have a bit of cake, surely.' A knock at the door startled them and all you could hear were expulsions of breath as they were brought out of their personal thoughts. 'I'll go,' said Ida. 'It'll be a first-footer. You know the superstition, coal, salt, bread and whiskey, for warmth, wealth, food and good health. If he hasn't got any of those I'll kick him up the arse and tell him to get lost.'

Arthur and Alfie chuckled and Carrie managed to raise a smile. 'Just the whiskey,' said Arthur. 'That'll do.'

Ida went into the hall then returned to the living room pulling a face. 'As I thought,' she said. 'A first-footer. Gave me a bit of coal. No salt, bread or whiskey. First-footers aren't like they used to be.'

'It was all I could find,' said a voice from the door, 'and I had to get that from out the gutter.'

'Tommy!' squealed Pearl, getting out of her chair and throwing herself against him. 'You're home, thank God, you're home. Are you alright? Do you need to eat. Or drink? What do you want? Sit down. Sit down.'

Tommy laughed. 'Steady, steady, let a man sit down for a minute. Yes, I'm home, thanks to David Lawrence. They checked out his story at the club and released me an hour ago. It was close though. I was ready to spend another night in a police cell. God, they're

uncomfortable. The beds are no more than a plank of wood chained to the wall with a thin bit of, I dunno what it was, over it. One blanket. It was bloody freezing.'

'What about the food,' asked Ida, thinking about her favourite subject.

'Terrible, about as bad as you can get. 'Don't know who's doing the cooking down there, but it's not you, Ida, that's for sure.'

'Is this it now, son?' asked Arthur, sitting in the chair next to Tommy's and leaning in towards his son. 'Is it the finish of it?'

'Yeah, they said the evidence was inconclusive to suggest my involvement. Len West did a real number on me, blamed me for Bateman's death and hiding the body.' He glanced at Carrie. 'Sorry, Sis, this can't have been easy for you either.'

'Not as hard for me as it's been for you. You must have been scared, Tommy.'

'I'm not going to lie, I was scared. There was nothing I could do. West had given them such a convincing story I had nothing to fight back with, and his friends backed him up. Yeah, it was pretty awful. It's the last time I ever want to see the inside of a police station cell.'

'Do you think he did it?'

Tommy looked up at her and she suddenly realised how gaunt he was, that his skin was grey and his eyes had lost their brightness. 'He was released as well but he'll be done for lying to the police. No doubt he'll pay someone off and get away with it. He's a regular down there.'

'Why did they release him?' asked Pearl, looking worried. 'We all thought he was a dead cert for it.'

'They found something in the yard behind the Olde Angel pub, a gold pin covered in blood. Did you know there are different types of blood? I didn't, hadn't even occurred to me, but it was what got Len West released. The blood on the pin wasn't Arnold Bateman's and it wasn't mine or Len's.'

'Did they test you then?'

'A pinprick. It's one of the reasons why I was held so long. They found the pin on Christmas morning but it takes a while to test the blood. Because they were investigating a murder they pushed it to the top of the list, and it's still in its early stages, but they found enough difference to know it wasn't our blood.'

Carrie sat on the sofa and reached for her drink, deep in thought and needing the fortification of alcohol to steady her and get her thoughts in order.

'This pin they found. When they asked you about it did they say what kind of pin it was?'

'They showed it to me, asked me if I recognised it, cleaned up of

course. It wasn't very big, solid gold with a diamond in the middle, surrounded by a six-pointed star. Dunno what that is, although they seemed to know, mentioned it might be a religious thing.'

Carrie sipped at her glass and inhaled deeply, then stared into the fire biting her lip in uneasiness, as though searching the flames for answers. She knew exactly what the pin meant. The Star of David was a symbol of the Jewish faith.



Chapter 67



THE SNOW FELL SOLIDLY past the window and Arthur sighed. It was the day of Florrie's funeral and he'd prayed for fine weather, but like everything else in life things never turned out quite the way you wanted them. This was the day he'd been dreading, when he said the final goodbye to the woman he'd lived with for twenty-six years, and with whom he'd had four children plus two they'd lost as babies, one between Elsie and Carrie, and one after Alfie. He'd wondered about those babies, had considered what they would have been like had they lived, and now they were going to be joined by their mother, the woman who gave birth to them and had mourned them, not for long, mind. Florrie had got on with it because she'd had to, what with having the other kids to care for. No, Florrie wasn't one for sentimentality.

He let the curtain fall back. He'd come home to Hanbury Street the night before, feeling it was only right and proper for Florrie to leave from the house she'd lived in for most of her life, and it was only right and proper for him too. Anything else would have been less than respectful and the family had reluctantly agreed with him.

He thought about his time at Nightingale Lane over Christmas and New Year and acknowledged it was the best thing for him to stay with Carrie, Tommy and Pearl. He wasn't getting any younger, and although Hanbury Street had always been his home, he was born in a house down the street, the contrast between the two houses was stark. Everything about Hanbury Street seemed dismal to him now, not least because it was where Florrie had died. He would never forget it of course; his memories of Florrie and the beginning of his own family of which his time there was an intrinsic part meant he wouldn't forget, but the kids had been right. His memories of Florrie went where he went. It didn't matter where he was.

He saw Tommy, Carrie, Pearl and Alfie go past the front window and got up to let them in. They shook off the snow from their clothes as they stepped into the small front room, then went across to the fire to warm up before leaving for the church.

‘You alright, Dad?’ Carrie asked him. ‘We were a bit worried about you coming back here on your own last night. It must have been freezing in here. There hasn’t been a fire lit in here for nearly three weeks.’

‘Yeah, it was a bit cold, but I had that soup Ida made me, and once I’d got the fire going it soon heated up.’

Carrie nodded and smiled, thinking how awful he must be feeling. ‘Will you come back here...afterwards I mean?’

‘No, love, I’ll come back with you. I’ve let the landlord know there won’t be any more rent coming from me, that he needs to rent it out to someone else. It’ll do someone won’t it, another family?’

Carrie glanced at Tommy and smiled. ‘It’ll do someone grand, Dad.’

They stood at the graveside as Florrie’s coffin was lowered into the earth. Arthur buried his face into a handkerchief as he said his last goodbye, Carrie’s arm around his waist to comfort him. Tommy, and Alfie the youngest child and Florrie’s favourite, stood stoically behind their father like sentries, Alfie allowing his tears to fall unchecked down his cheeks until he wiped them away with his sleeve.

‘Where’s Elsie?’ Pearl whispered to Carrie. ‘I looked for her in church but she wasn’t there. Little Rose was asking after her. She thought she would see her today.’

‘It won’t matter even if she comes now. Rose won’t see her. I sent the children home with Ida. Standing at a graveside is no place for a child.’

‘I wonder why she didn’t attend. I thought she and Florrie were close.’

‘They were, but Elsie’s life has changed. She’s in thrall to Len West and if he says she doesn’t come, she doesn’t come.’

Pearl sighed and shook her head then gasped and grabbed Carrie’s sleeve. ‘Oh my goodness, talk of the devil. What’s he doing here?’

Carrie frowned then looked across the graveyard to the entrance. Len West was leaning against the wrought iron railings smoking a cigarette, looking for all the world as though he was waiting for the pubs to open instead of witnessing a funeral. Carrie glanced at Tommy then at Pearl.

‘Don’t let Tommy see him,’ she said to Pearl, sotto voce. ‘He didn’t murder Arnold Bateman but if Tommy gets his mitts on Len West there’s no telling what he’ll do.’ She pushed Pearl next to Arthur. ‘I’ll go and talk to him. There’s a reason he’s here and I need to find out what it is.’

She quietly left Arthur’s side and walked across the new fall of snow towards Len West who watched her with narrowed eyes as she got closer to him. She stopped a few feet away from him, noticing that

he was no taller than her, his face gaunt with under-nourishment, his frame, scrawny, made to look bigger in his bulky overcoat, a beautiful coat, clearly expensive, with an astrakhan collar, the sleeves far too long for his arms, reaching the middle of his hands. She immediately thought of a schoolboy wearing clothes passed down from an older brother, someone who was trying to look more substantial than they were and she realised how pathetic he looked, yet there was an air about him. A confidence that belied his gaunt appearance, one that said he was sure of himself. And Elsie fell for it, she thought.

‘Why are you here?’ she said.

‘I need to speak to your sister,’ he said, squinting through the smoke of his cigarettes. ‘She’s let me down.’

Carrie frowned. ‘You’re talking in riddles. My sister lives in a house that you own, works for you, on her back mostly.’

‘Whatever my business concerns are, they’re none of your business, missus, but I need to speak to her. She’s my wife. Don’t get yourself involved in what she does. I can assure you it’s something you could never do. Just tell me where she is.’

Carrie shrugged, a curl of anxiety reasserting itself in her chest. ‘She’s not here.’

Len smirked then chuckled. ‘Not at Florrie’s funeral? Come on, Mrs Bateman. Oh, you’re still Mrs Bateman are you, or are you calling yourself something else these days since your old man copped for it.’

Carrie’s jaw hardened and as she turned away from him he called her back.

‘No wait, look, she hasn’t been home for two days. I thought she went off with one of her punters, a rich old git from Westminster who kept asking her to run away with him but he’s been back looking for a tumble, so I thought she was with you, or with her Pa. I just want to know where she is, that’s all.’

‘Your guess is as good as mine, Mr West. I haven’t seen her since Christmas night.’

‘Her little ‘un, still with you is she?’

Carrie ignored the question and walked away, her head held high, her heart thumping in her chest. She momentarily closed her eyes then opened them quickly and arranged her features so that they matched the other mourners standing at the graveside.

‘Well?’ Pearl said close to her ear. ‘Why’s he here?’

‘Looking for Elsie. She’s missing.’

‘What?’

‘He says he hasn’t seen her for two days.’

Pearl stared at her. ‘Oh, no, Carrie. What now?’

‘We find her, Pearl. She’s our sister. We must find her.’



Thank you

JUST A NOTE TO SAY thank you for reading 99 NIGHTINGALE LANE. Carrie's story means so much to me because it's based on my own family. My grandmother went to India when she was expecting my father and their story is so interesting I had to include them in one of my books, albeit a different kind of life to the one they led. I hope you enjoyed it and have fallen in love with Carrie and the wonderful 'family' she's gathered around her. As a writer, I love feedback. Candidly, you're the reason I continue writing about the characters you love. So, tell me what you liked, what you loved, and even what you didn't love. It would be good to hear from you, and you can write to me info@andreahicks-writer.com and visit me on the web at www.andreahicks-writer.com I will always personally reply because your thoughts and comments mean so much to me.

Finally, if you're so inclined, I'd love a review 99 NIGHTINGALE LANE. A short phrase, a few words is all that's needed, or even a rating which takes just a click. The Amazon feedback system is perfect for telling your fellow readers how a book made you feel...

I hope 99 NIGHTINGALE LANE took you to a wonderful place.

With very best wishes,

Andrea

PS I thought you might like to know about the next book in the series, a complimentary book to the Nightingale Lane series called MRS COYLE'S COOKBOOK. This is a handbook of Ida's stories of how she fought her way up through the below stairs ranks to become cook at 99 Nightingale Lane and includes some of the recipes popular at the time. If you love Downton Abbey...and the stories from 99 NIGHTINGALE LANE,

you'll love Ida's stories. Enjoy!

[MRS COYLE'S COOKBOOK](#)



*The continuation of 99 Nightingale Lane...1918 at 99 Nightingale Lane
will be with you in June 2021*



[About Andrea](#)

ANDREA HICKS IS THE author of women's contemporary, romantic and historical fiction. She is currently writing 99 Nightingale Lane, Part 8, of Carrie's wonderful story. Her warm and heartfelt writing takes us even further into the life of Carrie Dobbs, a women who is determined to be self-reliant and to put right the wrongs inflicted on her and her son no matter what it takes.

[99 Nightingale Lane Part 2](#)

[99 Nightingale Lane Part 3](#)

[99 Nightingale Lane Part 4](#)

[99 Nightingale Lane Part 5](#)

[99 Nightingale Lane Part 6](#)

[99 Nightingale Lane Part 7](#)



99 Nightingale Lane

1918

Part 7



A LITTLE SNIPPET OF Part Seven to whet your appetite...

‘The war in Europe still rages in 1918.

Carrie's work with convalescing soldiers continues. The Belgian refugees have returned to their homeland, leaving behind a request for her to visit when the war is over, one she readily accepts. The day of Arnold's funeral has passed, much to Carrie's relief, but her mind still conjures with the knowledge she holds about the gold and diamond Star of David pin found near Arnold's body. Someone killed him and until she knows who she will not rest, even though she had no love for Arnold because of his treatment of her and her son, John. She knows The Star of David is a symbol of the Jewish faith, and remembers her first love and John's father, Johan wearing a pin on his lapel, yet cannot bring it to mind enough to challenge him.

And then there is her sister, Elsie's disappearance. Her little daughter, Rose pines for her. Carrie has run out of answers and is left only with many questions as to why, if Elsie is safe and sound, she would not have let them know and ensured Rose's safety.

The drama of the war still plays out in Europe and beyond, yet unknown to all of them another enemy is about to make itself known in the most devastating way, and will challenge Carrie and her family more than they ever thought possible.’





Chapter 68

Carrie stood outside and watched silently as Arnold's friends left the church in ones and twos, some dressed in their regiments uniforms and about to join their comrades in France, the matches and cigarettes leaving their pockets as soon as they'd distanced themselves from the crumbling archway at the church door. The smoke ascended in curls of vapour that hung above their heads like a cloud, then was whisked away by the increasing breeze. They didn't speak to Carrie, passed her without acknowledging her apart from the occasional contemptuous glance loaded with venom. Tommy and Pearl watched with irritation as the men ignored her as though she wasn't important, and went to her side, Tommy itching to confront them.

'Idiots,' said Tommy.

'They don't know,' Carrie answered.

'Maybe it's time someone told them.'

'Maybe, but not us. We're bigger than that. Arnold isn't here to defend himself. And after today we can forget we ever knew Arnold Bateman.'

'He couldn't defend himself could he, even if he was here. All you would be doing is telling the truth about him. They should know the real man.'

'What about your name, Carrie. Will you revert to Dobbs?' asked Pearl, attempting to change the subject.

Carrie nodded. 'As soon as is decently possible, yes. I'll look into it when things have calmed down. I don't know many who would call me Carrie Bateman. It's almost like it's been forgotten and I can't say I'm sorry.'

The vicar approached Carrie, his hands clasped in front of him, the bottom of his white cassock, grubby with mud and slush that had been churned up by those attending Arnold's funeral.

'We will make our way to the grave now, Mrs Bateman. If you and your supporters will follow me.'

Carrie dipped her head, and Tommy tutted and shook his in exasperation. 'It's not forgotten by everyone.'

'Thank you,' Carrie said to the vicar with a half-smile. 'It was a lovely service.' He made a small bow to her then began to walk down the path towards where Arnold's grave would be. Dolores Bateman, Arnold's mother joined her, her eyes red from weeping, her tears still on her cheeks.

'May I walk with you, Carrie. I don't know anyone here.'

‘Neither do I, Dolores. Of course you must walk with me. We’ll go together.’ She linked her arm through the older woman’s and they followed the vicar side by side in a slow walk to where they would say goodbye to Arnold Bateman for the last time.

As they left the graveyard Carrie sighed with relief. For so long she had felt as though Arnold cast a shadow into her life, but his murder had brought other thoughts, other concerns, even a little guilt at wishing him gone, although anyone would have understood why.

Someone had killed Arnold, deliberately, purposefully. The association was too close, and even though Arnold was now out of her life she was his widow, a woman who had not mourned his passing, yet the way he had died had filled her with a new anxiety. Her dreams had been laced with images of Arnold, mirages she did not want. She had always believed that in every person there was good, even if it was the most infinitesimal amount surely it was the saving grace, but when she’d met Arnold that belief had been dissolved, as though it had been swept out of her conviction as easily as sweeping something off a table. It grieved her and made her worry for the future.

Pearl threaded her arm through Carrie’s and squeezed. ‘It’s over, Carrie. At last. Now you can begin to live, really live. You and David can have a future.’

Carrie smiled and patted her hand. ‘Yes, we can.’ She gazed off into the distance.

‘Carrie?’

‘I’m alright, Pearl. I’m...I’m worried about Elsie. There’s been no word from her and I just don’t understand. At Christmas we made friends, formed a closeness that we’d never had before and it was wonderful, which is why I’m so worried something bad has happened to her. Why hasn’t she got in touch with me and Tommy. When she left on Christmas night she said we’d meet up for a cuppa but I’ve not heard from her since. Let’s face it, she’s married to Len West and who knows who he’s upset. He’s a bad lot and got his grubby fingers in lots of pies, none of them good. I’ve gone through so many thoughts in my head as to what’s happened to her and none of it is making me feel better.’

Tommy came up behind them and put his arms around them both.

‘Arnold’s mates are going to the pub in Pratt Street. I take it we won’t be joining them.’

‘I don’t think it’s a good idea and not just because it was the last place Mum went before she became ill. I was thinking of asking Dolores to come back to Nightingale Lane for a cup of tea and a bite to eat. None of Arnold’s friends have spoken to *her* either, poor woman. You think they would try and understand how she’s feeling. Arnold was her son after all.’

‘They’re pig ignorant. Hate to say that about some of our lads but no doubt it’s Arnold’s doing. God knows what he told them about us, and her for that matter. They didn’t exactly have an easy relationship did they, from what you’ve said. We know they’re not all the same though don’t we? The boys who come to us at Nightingale Lane couldn’t be more grateful.’

‘Well, if we ever get any of these soldiers to take care of they might feel differently about us.’

Back at Nightingale Lane, Carrie settled Dolores in the front sitting room with a cup of tea. Ida joined them bringing some little sandwiches and cakes for them to nibble on.

‘I’m sorry for your loss, Dolores,’ Ida said to her, sitting in the chair opposite. She put a hand on Dolores’. ‘I can’t imagine what you must be feeling.’

‘Thank you, Ida. Only a mother would understand. Arnold wasn’t perfect by any means. He could be very difficult at times, you know, hard to please, just like his father, but I wouldn’t have wished any of this on him.’ She began to cry. ‘Who would want to kill him, Ida,’ she said, her voice a whisper. ‘Why would someone murder him? At least if he had been taken in the fighting he would have been with his mates, and he would have been fighting for our country. This way...it’s just so brutal.’

Carrie went to her and put her arms around the weeping woman. She had mixed feelings of course, knowing how she’d felt about Arnold before he was murdered, had wanted him gone herself at times, but the way he’d treated her wasn’t Dolores’ fault. Dolores was a good woman who had unfortunately given birth to a bad person, but perhaps it was always going to happen considering his father’s philosophy regarding women.

‘We’re so sorry, Dolores. It’s been awful for you.’

Dolores turned to her. ‘And you, my dear. You must have suffered too. You’re a widow now. Widowhood is not always an easy cross to bear. I should know. I’ve been a widow for years.’

Ida gave a little shrug as Carrie’s eyes met hers. ‘I’ll try and bear it as best I can.’

Dolores patted her arm. ‘I know you will, Carrie. We widows must stick together. I hope you’ll be a frequent visitor to Pratt Street. I know Arnold has gone, but we’re still related, aren’t we? You’re the daughter I never had and it would grieve me even more if I thought I’d never see you.’

Carrie sat next to her as Ida left the room, feeling it wasn’t her place to be present when Carrie was with her mother-in-law. Carrie glanced up, wishing he’d stay, but knowing why she’d gone back to the kitchen. It was because she thought it was her place. As far as

Carrie was concerned, Ida was a huge part of her family, the motherly love she hadn't found with Florrie, the support and help and advice she had needed since she'd returned from Secunderabad, and she made a mental note to talk to her, to tell her that as far as she was concerned if she could pick a mother it would have been Ida who was head and shoulders over anyone else.

'I need to speak with you, Dolores. I wasn't sure if this would be the right moment but as we're alone I s'pose...I hope it won't hurt.'

Dolores looked up at her, her face creased with worry. 'Is there something wrong? Is it about Arnold?'

Oh, how I would like to tell you the whole truth about your son, Carrie thought, but I won't do that to you. I won't taint his memory because you need to find some comfort in your bereavement. Blood's thicker than water and I can't imagine what you're going through. 'It's about the widow's allowance I get from the army now that Arnold...has gone. I've heard from The Ministry of Pensions and they have granted me fourteen shillings a week for his loss even though he wasn't killed in the theatre of war, and as yet, no headway had been made as to the person who took his life.'

Carrie felt herself go hot when she thought of the gold and diamond Star of David pin that had been found by Arnold's body at the rear of The Olde Angel Public House on the Whitechapel Road. Every so often Johan's face would loom up into her mind's eye. She vaguely remembered him wearing a gold pin in his lapel, they were very much the fashion among high society gentleman, but she couldn't swear that it was a Star of David pin...and she fervently hoped that it wasn't, because she couldn't for one moment imagine Johan killing anyone.

'I'd like you to have it, Dolores. Even though running this house for injured soldiers doesn't make a profit, it looks after my needs, and I think your need is greater than mine. I know that the house in Pratt Street has been your home for a long time, but would you not consider moving to somewhere safer. With the pension you could afford it.'

Dolores stared at her, then her eyes filled with copious tears, allowing them to track down her cheeks. 'But you're his widow, Carrie. Surely, the money should come to you.' She placed her hand on top of Carrie's. 'I guessed some time ago you didn't have an easy time with Arnold, my dear. I know you came back to London without him and there was a reason for that. If he was the husband to you that my husband, his father, was to me, you didn't have a happy time. Can you not put it to good use, Carrie? And your little boy?'

'I haven't claimed for John, Dolores. Arnold wasn't his father as you know, and I felt it wouldn't be right, and he is well cared for

already. Not many people know that Arnold was not John's father, and now he is I have a home, I have a vocation at present, and my work and this house provides me with everything I need, but I am concerned about where you live. Your house needs attention and I'm sure your landlord will not put his hand in his pocket. I've thought long and hard about it, Dolores, and I want you to have it.'

Dolores looked at her with admiration and gratitude. 'Are you sure, Carrie? Is it right?'

'Yes, it's right. No one deserves it more than you.'

'You know I can't say no. I'm relying on charity. I have nothing.'

'All the more reason why you should receive it. I'll get it to you every week, and I'll help you find somewhere else to live. Where you are now will only get worse, Dolores. We must get you out of there as soon as we can. I noticed the damp patch in your front room covers the whole of one wall now. It was bad enough when I lived with you for that short while. It can't be good for you.'

Dolores glanced into the distance. 'Where should I go? I only know that house. I can't even remember the house where I lived as a girl. It's like it never happened it seems so long ago.'

Carrie rubbed her chin in thought. 'I could ask at Cripps and Pine. They were the firm that helped me when I bought this house. They might have something suitable for rent on their books. I'll go and see them tomorrow.'

Dolores nodded. 'It would give me an opportunity for a clear-out.' She chuckled. 'I'm dreadful at throwing things out. Arnold used to get so cross with me.' She looked down and bit her lip, then retrieved a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her eyes. 'I can do what I like now I suppose. No one left to tell me off is there?'

'Except me,' said Carrie with a kind smile.

Dolores squeezed her hand. 'Except you, Carrie.'

Carrie went into the kitchen after saying her goodbyes to Dolores, and flopped down in one of the chairs, laying her head on her arms on the table.

'Thank goodness today's nearly over, Ida. I was dreading it. I can't wait to get into bed and pull the covers over my head.'

'One day you'll look back on all this and laugh,' said Ida as she put a Shepherd's Pie in the oven.

Carrie lifted her head and frowned. 'D'you think so?'

'Ida chuckled. 'No not really, ducky.'

'Last year was bloomin' awful one way and another...and really wonderful in other ways.'

'That's right, Carrie, a bit like every year I've ever known.'

Carrie smiled and laughed. 'Yes, you're right as always.'

'Not always, ducky. No one's right all the time.'

‘You’re right, they’re not, including you. Why didn’t you stay in the front sitting room when I was talking to Dolores? I could have done with your support.’

Ida shrugged. ‘Not really my business was it. You’re related. Her daughter-in-law aren’t you, and she’s your mother-in-law even though his nibs has gone upstairs...or downstairs depending on what you think of him. I’m the cook, Carrie, and that’s all I am. And the last thing you need is my support, missus.’

‘I need *you*, though. Dolores might be my mother-in-law, but she’ll never be you, and she and I will never have the history we have. You’re not just a cook, Ida.’ She stood and went round to the other side of the table, putting her arms around her and hugging her. ‘If I could have chosen someone to be my Ma I would have chosen you, and I’m not besmirching the dead. Florrie didn’t care for me for some reason, but I know you do. Francis doesn’t know how lucky she is to have you for her Ma.’ She released Ida and looked into her eyes that were now wet with tears. ‘These past few months have been very hard and I couldn’t have got through them without you by my side. You feed us, protect us, love us. Our lives would be awful without you, Ida, so please don’t keep saying you’re just the cook. You’re not just anything. You are and always will be a very important part of our family, the matriarch, the one we listen to the most.’ Ida wiped her eyes on her apron. ‘Are you tired, Ida? Would you like me to get someone else in to do the cooking so you can have a rest.’

Ida’s eyes widened. ‘Over my dead body. And I’m not tired. I’ve never been better, yer cheeky ‘ound.’

Carrie burst out laughing. ‘Your face, Ida. It’s a picture.’

Ida chuckled heartily. ‘Is it now?’ She grinned to herself. ‘You’ve made me very happy and I’ve realised that I’m a very lucky woman. I’ve got everything I could possibly want here at Nightingale Lane, apart from Mr Coyle, that is. I still miss him, even after all them years what have gone by in a flash. If he was here everything would be perfect, but it weren’t meant to be.’

Carrie rubbed her arm. ‘You never talk about him, Ida, about what happened.’

Ida sighed. ‘There’s nothing to tell, ducky. He got the consumption, like what everyone else was getting at that time. Went before his time of course. It was the saddest day of my life went he went.’ She shook her head and stared into the distance, her memories taking her back to the day of Mackenzie Coyle’s death. ‘Felt like the ground had been whipped out from underneath me. All along I felt sure he’d be alright, but the silly bugger went to his stall on the market, didn’t he, when he wasn’t feeling well. It was close to Christmas and he said we couldn’t afford for him not to be out there selling to his customers. ‘They’ll

expect me to be there,' he said. Didn't want to let them down, see. I told him not to go, that whatever we didn't have we'd go without. Even the kids told him not to go. It was one of the worst winters we'd had for a long time, and God, it was cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey, but did he listen? No, he didn't. The following day he took that bad, coughing and wheezing and his chest was already awful from the consumption. He'd even gone to where they kept the tar barrels and stood over them breathing in. It's what they told you to do in them days, although no one knew if it really worked.' She came out of her reverie and stared sadly at Carrie. 'Well, obviously it didn't.'

'What did he sell? At the market?'

Ida smiled. 'Used to sell books at The Book Emporium, then vegetables. He was the best veg man around. Could get anything. All the old dears loved him. He was such a nice man. A very, very nice man.' Ida looked wistful and she shook her head. 'The best there ever was.'

'Has there never been anyone else, Ida? Would you never consider marrying again?'

'I just can't imagine it, Carrie, being married to someone else. And I've always been Ida Coyle. I'd have to be Ida something else, wouldn't I? Not sure if I could get used to that. And I remember the cook who taught me everything I know, Mrs Brimble. She lost the love of her life in the Crimean, they'd only been married a few short years. She said she'd die a Brimble 'cause that was her beloved's name, and that when her time came they'd be together again.'

'Do you think they are?'

'Who knows, ducky. It made her happy to think they would be, and I s'pose that's all that matters.'

'I just want you to be happy, Ida, that's all.'

'I am happy. You've made me very happy today, and I've been that busy raising my kids and working I've never had time to think about me. I think it's a bit late now, Carrie. I can't imagine a man looking at me and thinking that he couldn't get through life unless he married me. I ain't no Lily Elsie am I?' She started to laugh. 'My pinafore and mob cap wouldn't give anyone the come-on, would they?'

Carrie laughed with her. 'One taste of your fruit scones and they'd be like putty in your hands.'

Ida roared. 'D'you think so? Think it might take more than that.'